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The New Criterion

January 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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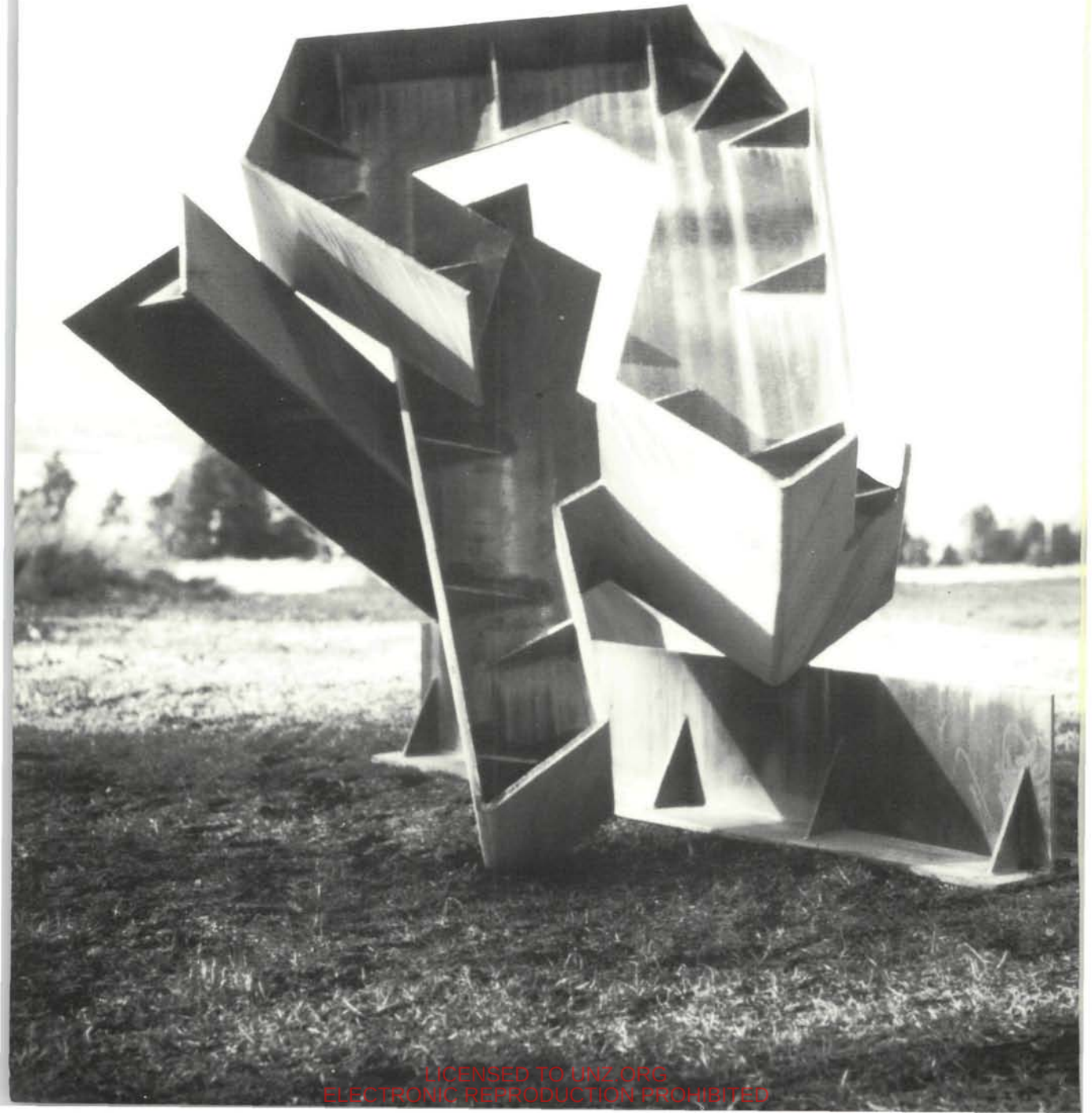

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Brock Baker reviewed Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* for our October issue.

Bruce Bawer's new book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has been published by Graywolf Press.

Jeffrey Hart is a professor of English at Dartmouth College. His most recent book is *From This Moment On: America in 1940* (Crown).

Edward Hirsch's new book of poems, *The Night Parade,* will be published by Knopf in the spring.

Roger Kimball wrote on the life of Wittgenstein in the December issue of *The New Criterion.*

Hilton Kramer's article in this issue is based on a lecture delivered last month at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona on the occasion of the exhibition entitled "Impacts: Joan Miró 1929-1941."

Samuel Lipman is the author of *Music After Modernism* and *The House of Music.*

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

Eva Resnikova writes regularly on dance for *The New York Observer* and *The New Criterion.*

Deborah Solomon is the author of *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (Simon & Schuster).

Terry Teachout is a member of the editorial board of the New York *Daily News.* He is preparing a selection of Whittaker Chambers's journalism, to be published next year by Regnery Gateway.

Renee Winegarten wrote on André Gide for our April issue.

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Miró's paradox: what happened after the "death of painting"

by Hilton Kramer

Every challenge to painting is a paradox—from the moment that challenge is expressed in a work.
—Joan Miró, in 1962

It has long been known to observers of the modern movement in art that the central pattern of its aesthetic development has been that of a dialectic in which every heretical impulse has served as the prologue to a new orthodoxy. Ideas that were regarded upon their first appearance as outrageous and revolutionary—and regarded as such not only by the public but by the artists themselves—are now seen to have initiated, more often than not, a process that led sooner or later, after varying degrees of opposition and resistance and debate, to their absorption into the mainstream of artistic endeavor. Such ideas were transformed, in other words, into a tradition—a tradition in which the iconoclasm of yesteryear came to be regarded as the cherished foundation of a new aesthetic. In earlier times, in the now legendary age of the avant-garde, this process of absorption and transformation was often a painful one for both the artist and the public. It was likely to be accompanied by a great deal of acrimonious polemic over the course of a generation, or sometimes several generations. This was certainly true for Joan Miró and the artists with whom he was most closely allied. Today, however, when the term "avant-garde" can no longer be usefully applied to any aspect of Western cultural life—except, perhaps, its *haute couture*—this process of absorption has been greatly accelerated, and is now likely to be concluded in a matter of months, if not weeks, with the accompanying polemics certain to be a good deal more accommodating and friendly. In the whole realm of art and culture, we use up ideas a good deal faster than we used to, and it may be for that reason that the ideas themselves tend to be of poorer quality—thinner in substance, more superficial in effect, and far less likely to have any lasting interest. In a culture that places as high a value on the heretical impulse in art as ours now does, it is no longer possible to make the old distinctions between heresy and orthodoxy with anything like the old confidence. Nowadays heresy needs only to win our attention—not our love or devotion or approval but merely our attention—to be assured a place in the ranks of the emerging orthodoxies, at least for the fifteen minutes or so made famous by Andy Warhol's celebrated dictum. And this curious cultural syndrome, which might very well be called the Warhol syndrome, has the effect of depriving aesthetic orthodoxy of its authority and reducing it to something merely temporary and provisional—more like a traffic light designed to allow every vehicle an opportunity to reach its destination than like anything resembling a firmly held article of faith. In an era in which the avant-garde has itself attained the status of an academy, the very concept of aesthetic heresy is robbed

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of its force, and is condemned to join the prevailing modes of orthodoxy in producing new but necessarily short-lived fashions in art.

When we look back, then, upon the major achievements of the old avant-garde from the perspective of our own very different period, to which it has pleased some of our contemporaries to give the name "postmodern," the aesthetic heresies that marked the most crucial stages in the history of modernist art inevitably acquire meanings that are unlike those originally assigned to them. In no artist's work is this change of meaning now more apparent, I believe, than in the art of Joan Miró—and most particularly in that aspect of Miró's art in the 1930s that was created under the banner of the "assassination" of painting. Miró's incendiary utterances on this matter are well known to students of his work and his period, and in America they have recently been made available to us again in the splendid volume of the artist's *Selected Writings and Interviews* edited by Margit Rowell.[1] These utterances on the "assassination" of painting constitute, indeed, one of the classic statements of the militant avant-garde in its heyday, and neither Miró's art nor much that has followed from his art can be entirely understood, I think, in isolation from them. It is important to point out, however, that they are the kind of utterances that lend themselves to an easy misunderstanding and misapplication. It is especially important to make this point today, for in my opinion much of the art that has lately been produced in the name of postmodernism rests on a willful misapplication of Miró's ideas and amounts to a misappropriation of his artistic legacy.

What, then, did Miró mean by the "assassination" of painting, and what role did this idea play in the development of his art and in the art that derived from his inspired innovations?

The first statement cited by Margit Rowell dates from 1930. It was Miró—or so he always claimed, anyway—who was quoted, anonymously, by Tériade in *L'intransigeant* (Paris), in 1930, as saying "I want to assassinate [painting]." As Margit Rowell reminds us, "Miró always maintained that the reference was to him. The phrase has been widely quoted since." And the following year, in the course of an interview with Francisco Melgar in *Ahora* (Madrid), Miró spoke out even more vehemently on this question:

> Rules? Art defies them . . . .
>
> I personally don't know where we are heading. The only thing that's clear to me is that I intend to destroy, destroy everything that exists in painting. I have an utter contempt for painting. The only thing that interests me is the spirit itself, and I only use the customary artist's tools—brushes, canvas, paints—in order to get the best effects. The only reason I abide by the rules of pictorial art is because they're essential for expressing what I feel, just as grammar is essential for expressing yourself.

This is certainly an extreme statement. It was unquestionably meant to serve as a warning and a provocation. Its threatening rhetoric clearly evokes the unruly force of the *révolté* spirit that Dada had begun to unleash upon the European scene more than a decade earlier—the deeply subversive spirit that by the early 1930s Surrealism had effectively appropriated and codified into a movement of considerable potency in a great many areas of art and life. Neither as a theory nor as a description of artistic practice, however, could Miró's statement be said to represent an isolated or an unprecedented point of view. Arp, Duchamp, Schwitters, and Max Ernst, among others, had already demonstrated a similar "contempt" for painting, and had attempted in their various ways to bring about its "destruction"—in the famous case of Duchamp, by abandoning

1 *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by Margit Rowell. Translations from the French by Paul Auster. Translations from the Spanish and Catalan by Patricia Mathews. G.K. Hall and Company, 326 pages, $35.

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painting altogether. This, obviously, was not a course that Miró himself was prepared to pursue. Much as he admired Duchamp, he could never bring himself to abandon painting. To that art he remained steadfastly devoted even in the act of announcing its "assassination."

This was the paradox that Miró acknowledged some thirty years later when he observed:

> What can I say, I can't be anything other than a painter. Every challenge to painting is a paradox—from the moment that challenge is expressed in a work.[2]

How, we may ask, was it possible for Miró to mount this violent assault on painting—and mount it, needless to say, with absolute conviction—while at the same time remaining so firmly attached to painting? Our answers to this question will illuminate not only something important about Miró's art from the 1930s onward but also something about the relation in which his so-called "heirs" in the postmodern era stand to the artistic and cultural life of their time. And our answers to this question must begin with an examination of Miró's relation to the Surrealist movement—a relation that is far more ambiguous, in my opinion, than has been commonly assumed.

There is no doubt in my own mind that Miró was the greatest artist to come out of the Surrealist movement. The role played by Surrealist ideas—especially the idea of automatism—in Miró's artistic development was clearly immense. Similarly, the influence wielded by Surrealist poetry on his artistic thought cannot be questioned; it was so central that there is a sense in which it can truly be said that Miró came to think of his own painting as a species of Surrealist poetry. Yet at the very moment that he was announcing his desire to "destroy everything that exists in painting"—a statement that embodied the very ethos of Surrealism—he was also concerned to declare his independence from what he called the Surrealist "battalion." In that famous interview with Francisco Melgar in 1931, Miró spoke out very clearly on this question:

> Just as Picasso has been labeled a Cubist, I've been labeled a Surrealist. But what I want to do above and beyond anything else, is maintain my total, absolute, rigorous independence. I consider Surrealism an extremely interesting phenomenon, a positive thing, but I don't want to subject myself to its severe discipline.

And when Melgar asked him if he wasn't himself one of the founders of Surrealism, Miró replied:

> No. The truth is that my own development was very slow, and by the time I arrived at an understanding of Surrealism, the school was already established. I was swept along by André Masson, Max Jacob, and I followed them, but not everywhere they went. They form a battalion, a company if you like, and everything they do is strictly disciplined. I want to be independent.

He then went on to say:

> But art doesn't exist for the Surrealists. What they understand by art is anti-art. In politics they espouse Bolshevism as the way to destroy present-day social ideals.[3]

Since it was in this interview that Miró went on to declare his intention to "destroy everything that exists in painting," we are obliged, I think, to examine the implied distinction he was making between his own "destructive" program and the "anti-art" ideology of the Surrealists.

The Surrealist "battalion" did not allow its artists to speak of "reforms," of course. *Revolution* was the term the leaders of the movement had elevated to a sacred status; it was a term that for the Surrealists had the virtue of blurring all distinctions between art and

2 *Selected Writings and Interviews*, page 266.

3 *Selected Writings and Interviews*, page 116.

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politics, and indeed, between art and life. It was to this language of revolution, which for Miró had more to do with art than with politics, that he turned in declaring his intention to "destroy everything that exists in painting." No other language would have seemed appropriate—which is to say, sufficiently provocative—at that time in that milieu. But the question must be asked: Does this language give us an accurate account of what Miró was actually doing in his art? I think there is every reason to doubt it. What I believe he was concerned to acknowledge thirty years later, in his observation that "Every challenge to painting is a paradox—from the moment that challenge is expressed in a work," was precisely his realization that his program to "assassinate" painting had in reality been a program to *reform* it.

Let us remember that in the passage I have quoted from this 1962 interview, Miró was speaking specifically about the radical collages and constructions of the late Twenties and early Thirties in which he employed all sorts of "nonpictorial" materials as his chosen instruments of "destruction."

> . . . a refusal to make "pretty" things pushed me [he said] to use the most sordid and incongruous materials possible. I denied my own gifts and turned against my facility, refusing the "miracle" as a sign of my contempt for success.

Miró duly acknowledged that both Dada and what he called "my admiration for Duchamp" played an important role in the creation of these "experiments," yet he readily admitted that they "had just as much to do with a kind of inner protest, a crisis of personal consciousness." When this personal crisis was brought under control—Miró gave 1934 as the date—the desire to "assassinate" painting had abated. His "taste"—Miró's word—for what he called "an art devoid of all visual charm and chromatic interest" had run its course, and he returned to the art of painting with a renewed vigor. Of course he had never repudiated, even in his incendiary statement to Francisco Melgar in 1931, "the customary artist's tools—brushes, canvas, paints." He may have insisted that "the only reason I abide by the rules of pictorial art is because they're essential for expressing what I feel," but the "rules," as he called them even at that moment of disenchantment with them, were nonetheless affirmed. Which suggests that Miró was never, perhaps, the "assassin" that he claimed to be or that others might have wished him to be.

What, then, was the nature of the "inner protest," or personal crisis, that prompted Miró to assume the posture of an "assassin" of painting? My own speculation is that it had much to do with the success that Surrealism was coming to enjoy in the society—the world of money, fashion, and "taste"—that, in principle, the movement claimed to wish to destroy. In the Thirties, Surrealism was passing through a crisis of its own. There were some notable defections to the Communist Party. There was an even greater tendency toward a complaisant attachment to the *beau monde* which at its more sophisticated levels embraced the Surrealist movement with an ardor it reserved for the latest sensation. Surrealism became what in America would later be called a form of "radical chic." It is my impression, anyway, that with neither the defections to the Communist Party nor this attachment to the *beau monde* could Miró feel any sense of solidarity, and about the influence of the latter on the rising generation of artists in the Thirties he clearly felt a profound disgust. In an interview with Georges Duthuit in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1936, he was very explicit on this question.

> Today, my young contemporaries know how to struggle when they are poor [Miró said], but all that stops the moment they balance their budgets. Compared to these people who begin their shameful decline at the age of thirty, how much I admire artists like Bonnard and Maillol. These two will continue to struggle until their last breath. Each year of their old age marks a new birth. The great ones develop and grow

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> as they get older. But what can I say about those buffoons who think only of the next cocktail party, who need no more than a living room carpet and a princess to begin groveling and showing off?[4]

If, in reading this passage, we are vividly reminded of the fate that has overtaken the art world of the Eighties in the postmodern era, there is ample reason for it. For in that alliance that was being forged between the Surrealist "revolution" and the *beau monde* in the 1930s, we were given a preview of what has now become the established—the institutionalized—relation between "advanced" art (and, indeed, all forms of radical cultural expression) and the bourgeois society that is its ostensible target.

There is, perhaps, one further comment that needs to be made about the passage I have quoted here, and that has to do with Miró's admiring references to Bonnard and Maillol. Nothing could have more dramatically demonstrated Miró's independence from the Surrealist "battalion" than this expression of respect for two artists who represented everything the Surrealists abominated. But by 1936, all thought of "assassinating" painting was over. The real assassins were at work in the Civil War in Spain.

Still, it behooves us to recall that the "experiment," as Miró called the collages and constructions he created out of "the most sordid and incongruous materials possible," was an event of immense consequence both for his own art and for the art that followed him, even if it did not succeed in "assassinating" painting for himself or for many others. The truth is, it effected a change in our thinking about pictorial art that has remained a living issue down to the present day. Such radical innovations in art, to the extent that they really do give us access to a realm of aesthetic experience that is genuine and new, can be ignored and resisted and condemned, but they can never be repealed. They acquire a life and force of their own that is independent of the artists who first create them; they are reborn—or, as is more frequently the case, aborted—in the work of the artists who come after them, artists who seize upon those innovations as a territory to be colonized and developed and domesticated. Without Miró's "experiment," we are unlikely to have seen such artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and Julian Schnabel and David Salle and Anselm Kiefer—to name only a few of the star personalities of the postmodern scene—develop as they have or become as chic as they have become. Yet I wonder if I am alone in believing that, far from being the true heirs of Miró's "experiment," they actually have more in common with the artists Miró was excoriating in 1936?

We can't know, of course, what Miró would have thought of the art that now dominates the international art scene, and we mustn't attempt to enlist him as a partisan of our own prejudices. I don't think we know very much—at least I don't—about how he came to view the art in which his own "experiment" became codified and enforced as an artistic standard. What we can be certain of is that he loathed conformity in art. He had a horror of facile routine in anything that had to do with the exercise of the artistic imagination, and we therefore have reason to doubt that the spectacle of seeing so many other artists turn his own heretical ideas and practices into a new orthodoxy would have given him much pleasure. Little did he dream that his shortlived program to "assassinate" painting would give birth to an entire school of pictorial assassins. But can anyone doubt that this is what has happened?

Although as an artist Miró was a radical skeptic who was inclined to question everything in art, including his own artistic practice, there was one element in his work—a central one—that must, I think, be counted as a piety that commanded a religious-like devotion; and this piety cannot be entirely separated from that fateful wish to "assassinate" painting. I mean his absolute devotion to improvisation and automatism in the creation of pictorial art. This was the

4 *Selected Writings and Interviews*, page 150.

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one article of faith he derived from Surrealism that he continued to cherish throughout the remainder of his life. The automatist imperative, for Miró, was something more than a working method. It served him as a mode of cognition and a source of poetic inspiration. It was the source of the new syntax he introduced into pictorial art—a syntax based on accident, incongruity, and improvisation. The creation of this new pictorial syntax was, in my view, the single most important thing he contributed to the art of the generation that followed his own—the entire aesthetic of the Abstract Expressionist school in America, for example, is unimaginable without it—and the rudiments of that syntax were discovered in the "experiment" Miró pursued in his radical collages and constructions. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that it was in the discoveries that Miró made during the course of his "assassination" of painting that he found the means to re-form painting for himself and for others.

In 1951, he gave us an account of what this automatist imperative entailed. He was asked if he began his paintings with a blank canvas, and he replied:

> No, never. I never use the kind of blank canvas that you buy in an art supply store. I provoke accidents, a form, a spot of color. Any accident is good.
>
> In the beginning, it's a direct thing. It's the material that decides. I prepare the ground—by cleaning my brushes on the canvas, for example. Spilling a little turpentine can also work quite well. If it's a question of drawing, I crumple the paper. I wet it. The water traces a form . . . . This mark determines what happens next . . . . It's the medium that directs everything . . . . The painter works like the poet: the word comes before the thought. You don't decide to write about the happiness of men! If you do, you're sunk.
>
> Make a scribble. For me, it will be a point of departure, a shock. I attach great importance to the initial shock.[5]

For a painter to employ such improvisatory means is a great risk, of course—and in our time we have seen many an artist "make a scribble" and come out in the end with very little more than a scribble as the completed picture. Only an artist of genius, only an artist who brought immense reserves of experience and poetic inspiration, an artist steeped in the lore of a profound culture, could hope to succeed by such a hazardous method, and the sad truth is that few have succeeded at this risky artistic enterprise on anything like Miró's level of achievement. But this, alas, hasn't prevented the method itself from being turned into an academic enterprise—a style that is taught in the schools, praised in the press, and honored in the museums and in the history books. It has not prevented, in other words, this heretical aesthetic impulse from being transformed into a shallow orthodoxy.

When Miró, in looking back at his artistic struggles in 1962, observed that "Every challenge to painting is a paradox—from the moment that challenge is expressed in a work," this was the challenge he had in mind: the challenge that led from the "assassination" of painting to its renewal in his own hands. The paradox he spoke of, however, has escaped the attention of many who would claim a place among his heirs. For to grasp the meaning of that paradox would be to question much that is now honored in art. Miró had the courage to question everything—even his own wish to "assassinate" painting—but that is precisely the kind of courage we find so conspicuously lacking under the domination of our postmodern academicians.

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5 *Selected Writings and Interviews*, page 219.

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Romain Rolland and political kitsch

by Renee Winegarten

. . . political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch.
—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

It is high time for you to realize that politics is a dirty business in which you would do better not to meddle.
—Lenin to Maxim Gorky, 1918

The strange progress of Romain Rolland—the once internationally celebrated novelist, biographer, and musicologist—raises questions about the nature and relationship of art and politics that have plagued literature since the French Revolution. Do artists as such have some special or superior insight into political affairs that gives them the privilege or obligation to act as guides and to hold forth on the subject? Have art and politics anything to do with ethics? Is the order of art the same as the order of politics? No particular respect is granted to politicians, should they choose to speak of art; indeed, their views on art and artists often appear risible or loathsome. But then, politicians are concerned with action and power, and with molding things as they are. Artists, on the other hand, are dreamers, eager to communicate their dreams, which they may be inclined to take for realities.

Reflections about such queries and distinctions are prompted by David James Fisher's book, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*.[1] This study offers a detailed account of the novelist's political notions and attitudes, and of the public events and pressures that ostensibly occasioned them. However, it leaves unresolved the central and deeply ironic enigma of Rolland's progress from being one of the greatest humanitarians of the age to serving as eminent fellow traveller and Stalin's cats-paw; from standing as the most passionate proponent of freedom of thought and of "the Truth" to dwindling into the man who knowingly kept silent about notorious acts of tyranny and injustice in Stalin's Russia. There are deeper roots for Rolland's later attitudes than surface public pressures. These roots may be sought in his temperament and upbringing as well as in the ambience of his early years and in his jaundiced response to it.

No definition of intellectual engagement as such is proposed in Fisher's book. Where did the notion of *engagement* (one of whose many meanings in French is voluntary enlistment in the army) come from? If we consult a French (or English) dictionary published before 1945 we will be unlikely to find the words *engagement*, *littérature engagée* (commitment, committed literature) used about the involvement of writers and intellectuals in the political and social

1 University of California Press, 416 pages, $32.95.

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affairs of the day. Ten years later, the *Robert* dictionary of 1955 still gives *s'engager*, *engagement*, *littérature engagée* as neologisms when referring to writers who take a stand on major contemporary problems. One of the sources mentioned is Julien Benda, who complained in *La Trahison des clercs* in 1927 that writers and intellectuals were betraying their function by becoming involved in (chiefly nationalist) politics. The other, of course, is Jean-Paul Sartre. In the influential prospectus of his newly founded journal *Les Temps Modernes* (1945), Sartre declared one of its aims to be "a contemporary literature, profoundly committed [*engagée*] to our age, concerned to express this age in its entirety with its problems, passions, dreams." Sartre went on to elaborate upon this view in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), a work that succeeded in putting the notion of *littérature engagée* and *engagement* upon the cultural map.

The idea that the writer has a social-cum-political responsibility or moral obligation to pontificate in a certain (left-wing) manner became fashionable with Sartre, aroused controversy and opposition, and entered the language mainly on his vague or obfuscating terms. It fostered confusion about the relation between art, ethics, and politics; and also about whether the various *métiers* or crafts of the writer, artist, philosopher, scholar, or intellectual (combined in Sartre's own person though less often in others) are always interchangeable. Sartre's most extreme formulation of the notion of *engagement* as a trust or duty occurred in his accusation that Flaubert was responsible for the bloody suppression of the Communards in 1871 because he did nothing to stop it. In short, Flaubert was not "on the right side of the barricades."

Clearly, writers were politically "committed" before 1945. Without going back to, say, Virgil, who was "committed" to the Emperor Augustus, or Milton, who was "committed" to the Commonwealth, we begin to approach the modern sense of the word with the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, who were ardently concerned with changing the social and political system in a period when politics had become the consuming passion of the day, as it was to be in the 1930s. Not all the *philosophes* were—like Voltaire or Jean-Jacques Rousseau—creative artists. Somewhat excessively, these eighteenth-century intellectuals *avant la lettre* would later be charged with helping to bring about the French Revolution. Voltaire, the great exemplar, was primarily concerned with righting individual wrongs rather than with overthrowing the regime. His outstanding heirs in the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo and Emile Zola, were voices of the individual conscience. They used the reputation they had gained by their literary work, and risked their own position and safety, by challenging the powers that be and defending the oppressed and the innocent. Romain Rolland would eventually assume their mantle in 1914, and he was very conscious of doing so.

In Fisher's view, Rolland stands midway between the Emile Zola of the open letter "J'accuse" (in defense of the wrongly condemned Captain Dreyfus) and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both Rolland and Sartre moved from detachment (mingled with socialist sympathies) to involvement. It is curious that Sartre does not appear to acknowledge any debt to Rolland, who had preceded him long before at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, that training ground for an elite of educationists. Speaking of Rolland's novel-sequence *Jean-Christophe*, Sartre adopted a tone of irony, mocking the Romantic-inspired delineation of the sufferings and loves of the great artist-hero that he himself had once aspired to become. Yet Rolland's example, as one of the foremost "committed" writers of the 1930s, must have been familiar to Sartre. Moreover, Rolland, in his "Salute" to his friend and correspondent Maxim Gorky, in 1931, had even singled out Flaubert as an aesthete who used art as a pretext for turning his back on action, thus anticipating Sartre's obsession with the political shortcomings of the author of *Madame Bovary*.

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It was Rolland, too, seeking to create a form of theater for the People, who set out to answer the queries "Why do I write?" and "For whom do I write?"—those queries later posed by Sartre, ever in vain quest of a proletarian public. The reply given by Rolland was that he wrote for those "on the march": "For I have always been on the march, and I expect to keep on until I die," he added. It is difficult today, especially after Milan Kundera's biting critique of the fantasy of the Grand March toward equality and the perfectibility of man, and other varieties of what he calls "political kitsch," to see this phrase without a shudder at its cost in human life. In later years, Rolland became very partial to the words "on the march," with their warlike echo, and to other battling metaphors—a curious turn for the former apolitical pacifist. Some ground for Rolland's course or "march," for his volte-face, is to be found in his youthful detestation of the amoral aestheticism of the Decadent movement, and in his hatred of the cultural pessimism of the *fin de siècle*, the age in which he came to maturity—a pessimism that he shared although he reacted against it.

Born in Clamecy in 1866, Rolland was some three years older than the more charismatic André Gide (relations between them were distant and sometimes barbed). He issued from a family of provincial notaries, supporters of the Republic, from "that old French bourgeoisie . . . imbued with the two-fold faith of Country and the Revolution," as he once put it. The French Revolution of 1789 haunted him throughout his life. His sensibility was dominated by its patriotic myths, its potent revolutionary vocabulary, its fascinating aura. Sanguinary it might have been, he felt, but it changed the world for the better: how to assimilate this paradox, which had also bothered Victor Hugo? Rolland wrote plays about the French revolutionaries and about revolutionary dilemmas of conscience, in early and mid career, and he tried to rehabilitate Robespierre in a drama toward the end of it. His imagination drew him inexorably to the Jacobins in the Convention Nationale and to the Terror of 1793-94. He told a correspondent in 1915 that he had long had a cult for "those bloodstained heroes" of the French Revolution.

Rolland owned that he was a great dreamer. Violent action and sacrificial death under the Terror figured in his dreams. In his diary for 1894, he noted: "Dreamt that I was a member of a bloodstained Convention, where a cruel Marat was issuing decrees of proscription. Terrorized, cowardly silence. Finally, some honest men and myself, in deep disgust, left the Chamber. We knew that by this action we condemned ourselves to be proscribed and that the only hope of salvation lay in flight. But time passed, I stayed, and the order came for my arrest." This dream would inspire a scene in his play *Le Jeu de l'amour et de la mort* (1925), whose central character is a conflation of the great chemist Lavoisier, guillotined in 1794, and the proscribed *philosophe* Condorcet, who memorably affirmed his faith in human progress on the brink of his demise in prison in the same year. Typically, Rolland yearned for action as a solitary, delicate, bookish young man, plagued always by ill health, and long repressed under the sway of a jealous and dominating mother (who died when he was in his late forties). Concealed beneath his formal exterior there lay a deal of pent-up anger waiting to explode.

Although he would have loved to be a man of action, Rolland's deepest ambition was to be "a great artist" like the giants whose biographies he composed (Beethoven, Michelangelo, Tolstoy). Never a man to think small, he seems to have assumed that he was one of their company: an outsider who inevitably met with misapprehension or hostility, like them. He wrote to Ibsen and to Tolstoy on equal terms. Already, by 1900, he was convinced that he had "a mission" to fulfill. He had the superiority of the artist almost before he had given any great proof of it. Deep-seated egoism; a proud sense of the correctness of

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his (low) estimate of the current artistic, musical, and political scene, along with most of its luminaries; a belief that he always found himself "on the right side of the barricades"; a certain vanity that he attempted to conceal beneath a veil of modesty—all these would go a long way to carry him later among the political dupers and the dupes of our bloodstained era.

He saw his generation, that of the period scarred by the defeat and the German Occupation of 1870, with its determination to be avenged, as inexorably set on the road to war. Gloom ensued, mingled with a burgeoning social conscience. On passing a workman who was on his way home from a day's heavy toil, Rolland confided to his diary in 1888: ". . . I am ashamed of the role of parasites that a civilization without conscience or vigor wishes us to enact." Joy and energy were what the frail young man desired, in an age under the influence of Nietzsche. Where to find them?

From his adolescence, he claimed, he had sensed the impending ruin of European civilization: a whiff of death pervaded it. The French elite was marked by weariness with life. He wrote apocalyptically: "And I saw the immense hypocrisy of laws, manners, religions, arts, thought, covering the sad nakedness of this base and heartless species." In *La Foire sur la place* ("The Market Place"), the fifth volume of *Jean-Christophe*, he evinced a gift for satire in his acerbic attack on the Parisian scene: on false artists; on critics as lice on the locks of literature; and on French politicians, those wolves and foxes of parliament. As Rolland affirms, his hero, the German musician Jean-Christophe Krafft, who excoriates all that Paris stands for, offers a psychological portrait of the author himself, the provincial outsider. Unattracted by the parliamentary democracy of the day, disgusted by political scandals under the Third Republic, Rolland remained an aloof observer. He became attracted to socialism less as a means of change than as an inner hope for some new kind of life. Something new and vital had to be found somewhere as a way out of the morass.

Rolland's historical studies took him to Italy, where he grew ever more fascinated by music. His discoveries among the treasures of the Italian creators of opera in the early seventeenth century, works which were then largely neglected, formed the subject of his thesis on the origins of modern lyric theater. He would delight the composer Vincent d'Indy by playing on the piano copies he had made of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. While in Italy, he became attached to an elderly half-French, half-German lady, Malwida von Meysenbug. She had been governess to the children of Alexander Herzen, the great Russian publicist in exile; and she had also associated with Mazzini, Nietzsche, and Wagner. With her, Rolland made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth (after the composer's death), where he was introduced into the intimate circle at Villa Wahnfried. He felt oppressed by its "German supernationalism" and offended by its "calm and confident anti-Semitism."

As a student, Rolland had defended his Jewish friend, the future writer, André Suarès, against anti-Semitic attacks at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. It might have been expected, therefore, that Rolland would have figured among the ardent supporters of Captain Dreyfus. This was not the case. The upheaval of the Dreyfus Affair struck him as a phenomenon of collective madness that had suddenly gripped French intellectuals, and his attitude to it does not show him in a particularly attractive light. Moreover, in 1892 he had married Clotilde Bréal, the daughter of a distinguished French Jewish academic, to his mother's displeasure. This marriage gave him an entrée into cultivated Parisian Jewish society, where rationalism and skepticism reigned, as well as into the world of banking and finance, and he did not feel at home there. These people did not really understand him or support him in his artistic aspirations, he believed. His ambivalence toward the Jews (a condescending philo-Semitism mingled with inherited preconceptions) pervades *Jean-Christophe*.

The wild verbal excesses of some of the

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Jewish partisans of the luckless Dreyfus offended Rolland's patriotic susceptibilities, as they did those of Proust. Remembering his provincial ancestral roots, Rolland saw the Affair as one form of social injustice among many, as a conflict between the French Army and "Jewish finance," between love of country and the claims of justice, and he withdrew in solitary self-righteousness. This withdrawal doubtless helped to bring about the end of his marriage in 1901. He tried to remain detached from politics for many years, having formulated two guiding principles: he would never be merely passive, and he would never join a political party. To these principles he was to adhere, at least in theory.

Fame descended upon Rolland fairly late, in his thirties and early forties, notably with his long novel-sequence *Jean-Christophe*, published in ten volumes and written between 1902 and 1912. It had been planned in 1896. The publisher, worried at the work's length, had insisted on the removal of an entire volume about "the Revolution and international social conflicts." The popularity of *Jean-Christophe* before and after the 1914-18 war was immense, and not merely in France, at a time when French was the second language of cultivated people around the globe. In 1915 Rolland received the accolade of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Who reads *Jean-Christophe* today? Yet it is perhaps unjustly neglected, for as a document it gives an invaluable insight into a particular mentality of the pre-1914 era, with its semi-mystical yearnings and generous aspirations; its exaltation of self-sacrifice; its dream of an ideal friendship between the German Jean-Christophe and the Frenchman Olivier (both of them being aspects of the author himself as well as highly symbolic of a reconciliation between the two hostile nations); its ambivalent feelings toward women; its preconceptions and passions. Rolland himself suggested in the preface to the tenth volume, *La Nouvelle Journée* ("The New Day"), that the work contained an ethic, an aesthetic, a faith. As a portrait of a moribund society it has been overshadowed by Proust's *roman-fleuve*, whose discussions on art and civilization may seem more sophisticated and more pertinent to our concept of the main path of twentieth-century literature.

There is something backward-looking in *Jean-Christophe*, something awkward and unpolished, as Gide noted at the time in his subtle comments on the work in his diary. It is not wholly a "poetic" novel; nor is it exactly a "realist" novel: there are too many coincidences, too many loose ends, too many sudden changes of mood and tone. Such unconvincing elements detract from its avowedly musical or harmonic structure. Moreover, some of the characters turn out to be paragons of saintly self-sacrifice or, more often, they tend to reveal failings like materialism, baseness of soul, and incomprehension of the higher values and energies of life. Rolland's moralizing often makes for didacticism in the solid nineteenth-century manner.

This was the work that established Rolland in the world literary and cultural firmament, crowned his hitherto thwarted belief in his solitary genius, and helped to arouse what he called his "moral responsibilities" as an artist, duties which he had not exercised during the Dreyfus Affair. The war, which he had expected virtually throughout his thinking life, broke out in August 1914 and found him in Switzerland, where he remained. He was by then in his early fifties. It pained him that he himself had helped to lead young men to go willingly to their death by his mystique of action and self-sacrifice.

Moreover, he was profoundly shocked by the way men of letters joined in the chauvinistic chorus that mounted on both sides of the Rhine. He was disgusted by the nationalist writer Maurice Barrès, by all those who, without any risk to themselves, were urging the young to the battlefield. Against the general grain, he wrote a number of essays, collected in *Au-dessus de la*

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mêlée ("Above the Battle") in 1915, where he sought "to appease [his] conscience." There he stood alone to defend the city of the mind, soul, and spirit; to uphold free thought, truth, humanity, moral values. Those intellectuals who should have been servants of the truth, and who ought to have supported him, were inferior to their task; they acted with the herd; they were dupers and dupes. His contempt for "the intellectual elite" of 1914-18 was, in fact, little different from the disdain he had felt for that of the 1880s and 1890s, during his struggles to be accepted as an artist. Nietzschean contempt for others was an essential component of Rolland's otherwise generous and semi-mystical nature—a failing to which French writers often seem prone.

His stance as a pacifist during the 1914-18 war brought him into epistolary contact with others of like mind, including Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. It also prompted virulent attacks by his patriotic or warmongering countrymen. In the early 1930s, Rolland was still smarting from their savagery. But at least, he felt, he had not become "an accomplice" through keeping silent, at least he had spoken out in the name of the highest values. In the face of injustice, he wrote at the time, "I shall damage my life rather than be an accomplice by my silence." What would lead him to forget those brave words?

Rolland's sympathy for the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 followed logically from his long obsession with the French Revolution—and with the Jacobins of 1792 rather than with the reforming aristocrats and lawyers of 1789. He was acquainted with some of the Russian intellectuals in exile in Switzerland, including the cultivated Anatol Lunacharsky, later Commissar for Education, who visited him in 1915. Trotsky credits Lunacharsky with winning over to the Soviet regime many prominent intellectuals around the world. Lenin himself would have liked to annex Rolland from the beginning, among the useful idiots, the "little wheels and screws in the mechanism of Party work," as he called writers. From the sealed train that carried him to the Finland Station, Lenin sent a telegram to Henri Guilbeaux, one of the novelist's associates in Switzerland, urging him to "bring Rolland." The ruthless founding father of the Soviet regime knew his man, but he was a little premature.

In the spring of 1919, Rolland was inviting leading writers and intellectuals throughout the world to subscribe to his "Declaration of Independence of the Mind." (Among the many eminent figures who signed it were Benedetto Croce, Albert Einstein, Heinrich Mann, Hermann Hesse, Stefan Zweig, Bertrand Russell, Upton Sinclair, Rabindranath Tagore.) During the war, too many leading intellectuals had placed themselves at the service of their governments, Rolland complained; but now, they should break free from these compromising and humiliating connections. Their only master was the Mind. "We honor Truth alone, free, without frontiers, boundaries, race or caste prejudice." Writers work for Humanity, for all men, not for individual nations, according to this noble and high-flown Declaration.

Rolland was still standing on the intellectual and moral high ground in his important controversy with Henri Barbusse, author of the once famous war novel *Le Feu* ("Under Fire"), who had already moved into the Communist camp. While expressing his sympathy for the USSR, Rolland also manifested deep disquiet about fateful "blunders" that had occurred there. The end does not justify the means, he told Barbusse. Violence might be a painful necessity sometimes, but he dissociated himself from the apology of violence as a virtue. It was essential to defend and safeguard moral values, and never more so than in revolutionary times, he maintained. These values were humanity, freedom, "and, most precious of all, truth." As he told Barbusse: "Let us not talk about the *provisional* lie! For an intellectual ["un homme de pensée"] here is the whole

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question: giving vent to his thought or perverting it . . . . If he perverts it, he has fallen from his height. Free thought does not have to take orders from Paris, Rome or Moscow." Lofty and memorable words . . .

Rolland thought then (in 1922) that the intellectual should judge and criticize the actions of the powers that be by employing irony in the manner of Voltaire and the contributors to the *Encyclopédie*. Working on a biography of Gandhi, he fell under the Mahatma's spell: thus he favored non-acceptance, which he understood as the supreme form of resistance against a criminal state, as a refusal to co-operate that required great moral strength. For Rolland, thought and action were inseparable. He could regard himself as "a soldier of Action" because he wrote plays about action and men of action, and because he made Jean-Christophe kill a policeman during a Parisian insurrection. This confusion about the roles of thought and action is central to the response of a number of writers to the French Revolution of 1789 and its Russian offspring.

In 1922 the controversy with Barbusse led him to formulate an important query which he addressed to those fellow writers who sought "to march in the avant-garde of thought": "Do you believe that the present duty of the artist, scholar, intellectual, should be to commit himself [*s'engager*] to the army of Right as in 1914, to that of the Revolution in 1922? Or rather does it not seem to you that the best way to serve the cause of humanity and the very Revolution is to preserve the integrity of your free thought—even against the Revolution if it did not understand this vital need for freedom! For if the Revolution did not understand this need, it would no longer be the source of renewal but a new form of Reaction, the monster with a hundred faces." The way in which this query is formulated suggests that in 1922 he wanted and expected a reply in support of freedom of thought rather than unquestioning total commitment to the Russian Revolution, whatever his sympathies for it.

What happened to make him change his mind, so that he came to place the truth as he knew it in second place to the fate of the USSR? What made him cross "to the side of the barbarians," as he expressed it, serving as "unenrolled free companion" or fellow traveller? This move seems to have occurred around February 1924, with the telegram that he sent to *Izvestia* on the occasion of Lenin's death. With his cult of great men, Rolland admired Lenin for his will of steel, as an "absolutely disinterested" dominator and master of men. The frail writer, like so many of his kind, was swept away by admiration for strength and power.

All the same, one of the more obvious causes of his move was the rise of fascism, with its own leadership cult: he broke with Gandhi because the Mahatma became friendly with Mussolini. Rolland detested Hitler and all his works, the persecution of the Jews, the burning of books. But equally he loathed industrial capitalism, imperialism, colonialism. He did not warm to the British Empire, and he feared world domination by the United States. In the face of the complacent ditherings or the apparent indifference of the governments of the Western democracies, the Soviet and pro-Soviet propagandists were able to maneuver the USSR into the heroic role of the sole fighter against the evils of fascism and Nazism.

As regards Rolland's developing commitment to the USSR, perhaps more fundamental than this struggle against fascism was the conviction, held since his youth, that European society and culture were thoroughly rotten and doomed. This dangerous and long-lived belief, together with his ideal quest for forms of energy and rebirth, inclined him to find at last what he had been seeking. After much consideration of "the strengths and the values of vitality" in both camps, he crossed over to the barbarians because he came to believe that they alone were the true bearers of the future and that with them lay all hope for renewal and for the salvation of humanity. The notion of the greater vitality of the barbarians was not

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original; neither were the quasi-religious images of renewal, hope, the salvation of humanity, and the "new" man, all of which formed part of writing in homage to revolution throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

In May 1927, in response to a protest against the Soviet regime's persecution of anarchists, Rolland reiterated his condemnation of the abuse of power. However, he added, in a forceful non sequitur, "Russia is in danger"—echoing the cry of the Jacobins (*La patrie en danger!*) to justify the Terror of 1793-94 and the slogan of their heirs ever since. According to Rolland, whatever the follies and often even "the crimes" of the Russian Revolution, it was the greatest, most powerful, and most fruitful social effort in modern Europe. It must not be lost. Naïvely, he hoped that the Soviet regime and the anarchists (who were to be done to death) would be reconciled.

Rolland's words did not go unheeded in the USSR. In September 1927 he received an invitation from his old acquaintance Anatol Lunacharsky to contribute to *Revolution and Culture*, a new cultural review to be published in association with *Pravda*, the organ of the Communist Party. Informed that he would be quite free to express his own opinions, Rolland accepted, stressing his differences but also his recognition of "the historical necessity" of the Russian Revolution and—more fateful—his desire to serve its cause. This was the year of Julien Benda's *La Trahison des clercs*, and Rolland would soon be hastening to attack the author as a sophist, disclaiming the idea of a clerisy, insisting that the intellectual was not a member of a caste with clean hands but "a special weapon of the army of the workers," a servant of the exploited. The man who formulated "The Declaration of the Independence of the Mind" had been the "servant" of no one.

Gradually, Rolland became ever more entangled. Two eminent Russian writers in exile, the poet Constantin Balmont and the novelist Ivan Bunin, addressed an open letter to him entitled "The Martyrdom of Russian Writers," urging him to speak out for their persecuted colleagues. Rolland's lofty reply was not likely to assuage their bitterness. He coolly told Balmont and Bunin that they were "instruments" of bourgeois reaction and international business. Soviet Russia was "the hope" of the future. They ventured to inquire how he could know what was really happening there. He told them that he himself was perfectly well informed by the various unbiased economists, doctors, and educationists who, after visiting the USSR, called at his home in Switzerland. His supremely confident reply invites comparison with Sartre's later snub to the reviewer who queried Simone de Beauvoir's easy acceptance of the fate of Boris Pasternak's companion, Olga Ivinskaya, and her daughter, who were condemned to a labor camp: "Have you conducted an inquiry as we have?" Sartre loftily inquired.

Rolland suggested reading matter that would enlighten Balmont and Bunin. Of course, they had his sympathy. He had shared "in thought" the misfortunes of André Chénier (the poet who perished by the guillotine in the last days of the Terror) and other victims of the French Revolution, like Chamfort and Condorcet. He himself would even have been tempted then to take the road to exile. And yet, the "great executioners"—Saint-Just, Robespierre—had built a new world. "Human progress, affirmed with courageous tranquility by the proscribed Condorcet, before he committed suicide, is bought at the cost of millions of sacrifices." Thus Balmont and Bunin were dismissed with a flea in their ear, as Rolland—who had once agonized over the human sacrifices made in the holocaust of the Great War—now grandly accepted the sufferings of others.

The very writer who had valued the solitary independence of the spirit acquired the collectivist vocabulary and violent invective of the fellow-travelling hack. He mocked words that (he claimed) had become aspects of mere idol worship, such as freedom of spirit, rights of the individual

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conscience. These merely served as masks to conceal those who exploited them for their own ends. He scorned "the sewer outlets of the 'free' press." Everything in the Western democracies was utterly squalid and intolerable. On the other hand, if the builders of the USSR had had to dirty their hands, *that* was to be accepted, for "we have not the right to be squeamish." Where earlier the Soviet regime had seemed to him to be too dictatorial, now Stalin's policy was "strong and wise." Rolland admired Stalin's "lapidary" comment that intellectuals were "engineers of souls." He did not appear to realize that, for Lenin as for Stalin, the true place of intellectuals was necessarily as servants of the Party and the State. As for words like "equality" and "the perfectibility of man," they too were a kind of idol worship, and one that concealed the rulers who exploited them.

The role of Rolland's second wife, the half-French, half-Russian Maria Pavlovna Kudasheva, remains to be assessed. She corresponded with him, became his secretary in 1929, and they were married in 1934, when he was sixty-eight. One who decried her influence on Rolland even went so far as to call her a Communist agent. She had many friends among leading Russian writers, including the poet Osip Mandelstam (shortly to perish in the gulag), who had high hopes that Rolland would write to Stalin on his behalf. Along with Gide and Malraux, the author of *Jean-Christophe* had urged the release of a prominent figure in the left opposition to Stalin, the revolutionary activist and novelist Victor Serge, of whom he disapproved. At that moment, in 1935, Rolland was visiting Russia with his wife. There, he stayed with Maxim Gorky, and was received twice by Stalin himself. The aging writer kept quiet in public about his misgivings, notably as regards Stalin's sadism and his tyrannical regime, misgivings that he confided to his diary. Urged by numerous informants to condemn the Moscow show trials, Rolland again chose to stay silent. He did not want to do anything that could be used against the Soviet Union.

On Rolland's seventieth birthday, in 1936, Gide paid homage to his *confrère*, recollecting a visit to his home in Switzerland in 1914 when they shared a love of music. Gide, a temporary fellow traveller, who received the full treatment in Russia in 1936, ventured to denounce the shortcomings of the regime, singling out the cult of Stalin, in his *Retour de l'URSS*. Rolland was outraged: he savaged Gide's book. Not surprisingly, Gide queried Rolland's integrity.

Why did Rolland keep quiet about what he knew? Privately, he tried to intercede with the Soviet authorities on a number of occasions. His old friend Hermann Hesse asked him to intervene with Stalin on behalf of two innocent victims of the Terror. Rolland told the author of *Steppenwolf* that he had written to Stalin and to other leading Soviet figures to try to obtain the release of his own friends, but he had received no reply. Apparently, ever since the death of Gorky (in June 1936), his efforts had proved unsuccessful. "The '*philosophes*' (as they said in the time of Jean-Jacques) no longer matter to the masters of power," he told Hesse pathetically in 1938.

Whatever his private anguish about these and other matters, such as the revealing "blow" of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, Rolland consistently maintained his silence. He resigned from the association of Friends of the Soviet Union, but he did so privately. During the Occupation of France, he finished his study of Beethoven in the lovely hill town of Vézelay, where he now resided. In November 1944, after the Liberation, he confessed that although he knew much, he had preferred not to speak out: "Even in his diary, even in his memoirs, there are things he [the writer] must be silent on . . . ." A month later he was dead.

In his book, Fisher expresses distaste for those who take a strong critical line on the fellow-travelling of the 1920s and 1930s. Adopting a detached historical position, he regards silence as "a compromise consistent

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with an unyielding antifascism." Tell that to the millions of victims of Stalin's terror! Silence based on ignorance is one thing, but Rolland had a pretty good idea of what was happening. Moreover, a public protest would not have involved the slightest risk to himself.

Indeed, the really painful aspect of Rolland's stance is that (like Sartre) he understood how silence can make one an accomplice of injustice: he had said so plainly in 1914. He well knew that creative writers, unlike politicians and party men, are primarily concerned with intuition, nuance, contradictions. He even once remarked, with unconscious irony, that since intellectuals "are incapable of fully understanding the complex mechanism of politics and of handling its secret machinery, their vanity readily makes them fall into the traps laid by the hidden masters of Affairs, who make use of them"—only he was not speaking of intellectuals in general or of himself but of those who supported fascism. This curious blend of perspicacity and blindness remains perplexing. Once he had found a faith "on the march," his own brand of "political kitsch," he could not bear to renounce it. "How can one doubt the faith for which one has lived? One might as well give up life," he observed in the last volume of *Jean-Christophe*.

If only he had confined himself to the realm of freedom of thought, to the cause of the victims of inhumanity, to the public protest against cruelty and injustice, wherever they are to be found, his reputation might have remained untarnished.

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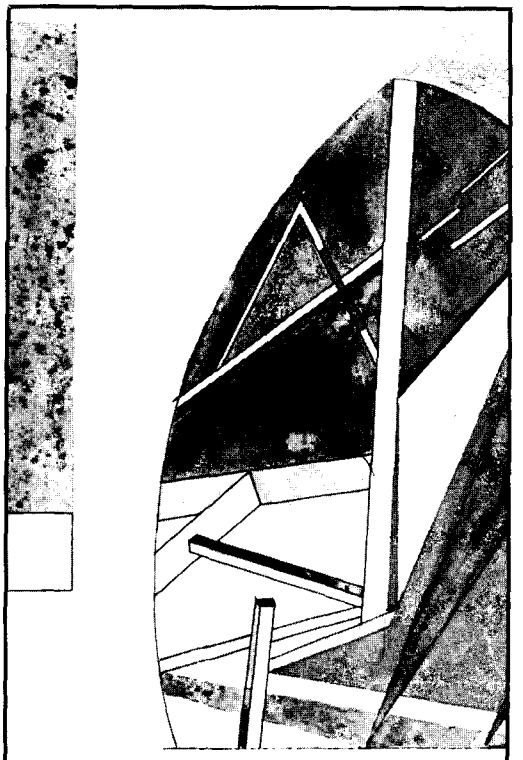

El Lissitzky, *Proun*, 1919/20

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Trouble in paradise: the gospel according to Pagels

by Roger Kimball

It was only to be expected that Elaine Pagels's new book, temptingly entitled *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, would be showered with all manner of adulation.[1] When her previous book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, appeared in 1979, it too was greeted by a chorus of critical and popular acclaim. It scooped up both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award in 1980, became something of a best-seller, and greatly boosted the reputation of its thirty-seven-year-old author, then chairman of the department of religion at Barnard College. The following year, 1981, Professor Pagels was visited by grace in the form of a MacArthur Prize Fellowship, a grace soon compounded by an offer from Princeton University, where she is currently the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion. How could *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* fail to be declared (as it promptly was) a "masterpiece"?

In the preface to *The Gnostic Gospels*, Professor Pagels tells us that she is interested primarily in "how gnostic forms of Christianity interact with orthodoxy—and what this tells us about the origins of Christianity itself." This is a fair enough précis, but it leaves unanswered the question why these brief, scholarly meditations on rather esoteric topics should garner so much attention beyond the studious enclaves of professional historians and specialists in the development of early Christian doctrine. No doubt part of the answer lies in Professor Pagels's rhetorical skill. Like her late husband, the physicist and writer Heinz Pagels, she is a gifted popularizer, able to present the most unpromisingly recondite material in a lively and engaging manner. Thus while *The Gnostic Gospels* rests on a foundation of extensive scholarship—as is indicated by Professor Pagels's two earlier and more technical books on related themes as well as by the hundreds of learned endnotes with which she garnishes *The Gnostic Gospels*—the book reads in parts like an adventure story.

It opens with an account of an Arab peasant's accidental discovery, in 1945, of a cache of thirteen leather-bound papyrus books and loose papyrus leaves in the desert near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. "Shortly before he and his brothers avenged their father's murder in a blood feud," Professor Pagels tells us, "they had saddled their camels and gone out to the Jabal to dig for *sabakh*, a soft soil they used to fertilize their crops." Happening upon a large earthenware jar, the peasant smashed it and was disappointed to find that it contained not gold but ancient papyri, which he brought home and dumped by the kitchen oven. In the following weeks, much of the papyrus that had survived buried in the desert for some fifteen hundred years went up in smoke: dried papyrus leaves make

1 *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, by Elaine Pagels; Random House, 189 pages, $17.95.

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excellent kindling. But after the brothers had dispatched their father's enemy—hacking off his limbs and ripping out and devouring his heart, Professor Pagels cheerfully informs us—fear that the police would search the house and confiscate the books led the man who had discovered the papyri to entrust his find to a local priest.

In the course of various dramatic vicissitudes, which Professor Pagels relates with considerable élan, the books were recognized for what they were: Coptic translations of fifty-two gnostic Christian texts, including several gospels, collections of sayings attributed to Jesus, and sundry spiritualistic poems and discourses. The lost originals of some of these works— written, like the New Testament, in demotic Greek—may date from as early as the late first century, the same period in which the canonical Gospels were composed. Twelve of the thirteen books were eventually acquired by the Egyptian government; the thirteenth, which was smuggled out of Egypt, was bought by the Jung foundation in Zurich.

While greed and professional rivalry repeatedly delayed publication of the Nag Hammadi texts (a full translation into English was not complete until 1977), they were at once recognized by scholars as a find of great importance. Not only did they vastly increase our firsthand evidence of gnostic writings, but, since what is deliberately excluded from a body of doctrine can often illuminate what is included, they also shed a good deal of light on the consolidation of orthodox Christian doctrine in the first few centuries following the death of Jesus. Not that it is easy to summarize the main tenets of the Nag Hammadi texts. Like most gnostic writings, they are full of obscurities and elusive portents. Here is a snippet from the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, a dialogue between a student and his spiritual master:

> I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning . . . . I have said, O my son, that I am Mind. I have seen! Language is not able to reveal this. For the entire eighth, O my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. And I, Mind, understand.

As Hans Jonas points out in his classic work, *The Gnostic Religion* (1958; revised edition, 1963), the term "gnosticism" refers first of all to a species of arcane religious teaching that flourished in the Hellenized Near East from about 80 to 200 A.D. A composite of Christian, neo-Platonic, and Eastern ideas, gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge") tends to be radically dualistic and to teach that the key to salvation lies in a secret knowledge revealed only to the initiated few. Taken together, gnostic texts contradict one another wildly. But, as the quotation from the *Discourse* may suggest, one recurrent theme is that the division separating man from God, the human from the divine, is an illusion that will dissolve with the enlightenment that gnosis brings. Hence the gnostic adept is invited to believe that genuine self-knowledge is at bottom an awareness of one's own divinity. Perhaps this helps explain why gnosticism has enjoyed such a vogue recently among certain literary critics, pre-eminently the redoubtable Harold Bloom, who has even favored us with a novel subtitled "A Gnostic Fantasy." (A phrase that might serve well as an epigraph to his collected literary criticism.)

In any event, gnosticism was early on condemned as heretical. Already in the late second century, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons wrote a five-volume treatise entitled *The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Knowledge* that undertook to show that gnosticism was "absurd and inconsistent with the truth." Nor need one look far into the gnostic texts to appreciate why orthodox Christianity proscribed it. Naturally, the Church frowned upon the habit of self-deification and the claim to be possessed of a secret knowledge that guaranteed salvation. It is precisely this aspect of the gnostic teaching that lets us understand why Hans Jonas concluded that gnosticism tends to exclude the idea of human virtue as generally

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understood and encourages a libertinism that borders on "moral nihilism." After all, if one is divine, the moral constraints governing mere mortals must seem eminently dispensable. The Church also took issue with gnosticism's tendency to equate the material world with evil, as well as its disturbingly revisionist readings (what Professor Bloom would no doubt call "strong" readings) of Scripture. For example, one Nag Hammadi text, entitled the *Testimony of Truth*, retells the story of the Garden of Eden from the point of view of the serpent—traditionally a gnostic symbol of wisdom—who emerges as the embattled harbinger of enlightenment and liberation, opposed to the tyrannical character called "the Lord."

And it is here, in gnosticism's revisionist readings of Scripture, that we touch upon a second, and perhaps more important, reason for Professor Pagels's popularity. For both *The Gnostic Gospels* and her new book are admired not only for their scholarship and entertainment value but also for their message, their stance, their . . . well, what can only be called their politics. As Professor Pagels notes in some prefatory remarks to *The Gnostic Gospels*, the book had its genesis in her research into the relation between politics and religion in the formation of Christianity. As one reads through *The Gnostic Gospels*, it soon becomes clear that her interest in political matters is not purely historical. In her concluding pages, she insists that she does not "side" with gnosticism over orthodox Christianity. Anyone who is as "powerfully attracted to Christianity" as she is, she argues, must recognize the theological and organizational structure of orthodox Christianity as "a major achievement." Yet one wonders. If *The Gnostic Gospels* can be said to have a thesis, it is that the suppression of the gnostic heresy in the second and third centuries deprived Christianity, and by extension the entire Western world, of an important source of moral freedom and spiritual vision.

In the course of developing this thesis, Professor Pagels tells a familiar story. In its early years, Christianity was pluralistic, open to many conflicting versions of Christ's spiritual message. This openness was discarded when the Church became institutionalized and transformed its teaching into rigid dogma enforced by the growing temporal power of the Church of Rome. In the beginning, Professor Pagels explains,

> those who identified themselves as Christians entertained many—and radically differing—religious beliefs and practices . . . .
>
> Yet by A.D. 200 the picture had changed. Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only "true faith." The majority of churches, among which the church of Rome took a leading role, rejected all other viewpoints as heresy.

Professor Pagels's expertise naturally discourages the non-specialist, such as the present writer, from quibbling with the details of her presentation: her knowledge of the field is evident on every page. Yet even the non-specialist is led to wonder whether she doesn't sometimes overstate her case. In the introduction to *The Gnostic Gospels*, for example, we read that "by the time of the Emperor Constantine's conversion, when Christianity became an officially approved religion in the fourth century, Christian bishops, previously victimized by the police, now commanded them. Possession of books denounced as heretical was made a criminal offense."

Really? Let us leave to one side the question of whether one may speak of "the police" in the sense intended here without being anachronistic. What about the more general historical observation that "by the time of the Emperor Constantine's conversion" Christian leaders were imposing their religious views through force? As Professor Pagels herself notes in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, Constantine is generally thought to have converted to Christianity around 313.

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That same year saw the proclamation of the Edict of Milan, which formally enfranchised Christianity without, however, declaring it the official state religion. Item four of the edict announces that "notwithstanding any provisions concerning Christians in our former institutions, all who choose that religion are to be permitted to continue therein, without any let or hindrance, and are not to be in any way troubled or molested." Item six goes on to insist that "all others are to be allowed the free and unrestricted practice of their religions; for it accords with the good order of the realm and the peacefulness of our times that each should have freedom to worship God after his own choice." There is nothing here about heresy or forbidden books, let alone calling in the police. Yes, after Christianity became in effect the state religion, toward the end of the fourth century, it did everything it could to consolidate its power and to suppress heresy, sometimes brutally. But did this not happen well after the conversion of Constantine?

This may seem to be a niggling point. But it highlights the polemical motivation underlying Professor Pagels's exposition of gnosticism and its relation to orthodox Christianity. The polemic is skillfully and subtly advanced, relying as much upon dark hints and questionable generalizations as on reasoned argument or historical evidence. Thus Professor Pagels writes that "those who called gnosticism heresy were adopting . . . the viewpoint of that group of Christians who called themselves orthodox Christians. A heretic may be anyone whose outlook someone else dislikes or denounces. According to tradition, a heretic is one who deviates from the true faith. But what defines that 'true faith'? Who calls it that, and for what reasons?" But the real questions are: Why did a wide range of orthodox Christian thinkers condemn gnosticism as heresy? Has the Church ever taken the notion of heresy so lightly as to regard "anyone whose outlook someone else dislikes or denounces" as a heretic? And, far from being the product of an arbitrary whim, as Professor Pagels suggests, is not the accumulated weight, wisdom, and insight of tradition the standard and measure of "true faith"?

Not surprisingly, Professor Pagels's program to rehabilitate gnosticism tends to proceed by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the tradition that condemned it. As she notes in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, "whether these writings—or which of them—contain authentic teaching of Jesus and his disciples we do not know, any more than we know with certainty which sayings or teachings in the New Testament are authentic." In one sense, of course, Professor Pagels is quite right: independent evidence—evidence, that is, apart from the Bible—about the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth is almost nonexistent. But her observation is not purely historical; rather, it is meant to establish a kind of parity between the orthodox and the heterodox. Indeed, it is revealing that the word "orthodox"—which Professor Pagels repeatedly reminds us literally means "straight thinking"—emerges as a term of censure in these pages, where "heresy," "gnostic," and their cognates are generally terms of admiration. (It is also instructive to consider Professor Pagels's use of quotation marks in *The Gnostic Gospels* and *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*: Why, for example, do key terms like "heresy," "true faith," even "nature" and "human nature" so often appear in quotation marks? Is it because Professor Pagels wishes to suggest that what has been called heresy is not really heresy, that "human nature" is merely a convention, a social construction?)

Unfortunately, Professor Pagels's campaign against orthodoxy also seems to have led her to indulge in some rather heterodox notions about what counts as orthodox. "Orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from its creator," she writes: "God is wholly other. But some of the gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical." Again, one wonders. For while it is true that many gnostics taught that self-knowledge is tantamount to knowledge of God, it is by no

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means clear that the "orthodox" Christian position holds that God is "wholly other" in the strict sense Professor Pagels intends. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example—to take one incontrovertibly orthodox doctor of the Church—explicitly maintains that God is intelligibly present to mankind and that the human intellect can meaningfully "participate in the divine vision."

Professor Pagels also faults orthodoxy for being insufficiently sensitive to what I suppose we must call "women's issues." She develops this theme at some length in a chapter entitled "God the Father/God the Mother," where she laments the "absence of feminine symbolism for God" in orthodox Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Acknowledging the reverence of Catholics for Mary, for example, she nonetheless points out that if Mary "is 'mother of God,' she is not 'God the Mother' on an equal footing with God the Father!" (It would be difficult, I think, to overestimate the resentment compressed in that exclamation point.) And so it happens that one of the wonderful things about at least some gnostic texts is that they "speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements." Never mind that other gnostic texts are far more disparaging of the feminine than orthodox Christianity ever was—the moral is clear: "the Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crises concerning sexual roles, challenge us to reinterpret history—and to re-evaluate the present situation."

It is worth pausing a moment to consider these "challenges." Exactly how would Professor Pagels have us "reinterpret" history now that we have the benefit of the these gnostic texts? As a prolegomenon to contemporary feminism, perhaps? And how should we "re-evaluate" our present situation? As an occasion to liberate ourselves from the strictures of an orthodox tradition that has suppressed heresy just as it has oppressed women? In her new book, Professor Pagels comes close to arguing just that.

The announced purpose of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* is to explore "how certain ideas—in particular, ideas concerning sexuality, moral freedom, and human value—took their definitive form during the first four centuries as interpretations of the Genesis creation stories, and how they have continued to affect our culture and everyone in it, Christian or not, ever since." Like *The Gnostic Gospels*, Professor Pagels's new book manages to be engagingly written and informative without being unscholarly or unacademic: buttressing this text of one hundred and fifty pages are nearly five hundred erudite endnotes, referring the reader to everything from the writings of the Church fathers in the original languages to works of contemporary historical research and feminist tracts with titles like *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Professor Pagels has provided a vivid sketch of Judea under Roman rule, and her account of how the moral teaching of early Christianity departed from both that of the Romans and that of the Jews is deftly handled.

But like its predecessor, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* also has a definite political subtext. Noting that "abrupt changes in social attitudes" regarding sexuality have taken place recently and have deeply affected the way we in the West think about a host of issues, including "marriage, divorce, homosexuality, abortion, contraception, and gender," Professor Pagels begins by asking: How did the way we have come to think about such issues arise in the first place? For an answer, she turns to the orthodox reading of the first three chapters of Genesis. How, she wonders, did that reading itself become orthodox? How did rival readings differ from the orthodox interpretation? What, in this age of "abrupt changes in social attitudes," can we learn from these rival readings? These are the main questions that motivate her book.

Of course, the traditional interpretation of the Genesis account of the creation of the world and mankind is hardly calculated to please our modern sensibilities. Apart from

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God's stirring command in the first chapter that man "fill the earth and subdue it"—which is very much in accord with the ambitions of our scientific, technological approach to reality—the account of creation in Genesis will strike many as downright reactionary. Not only is the challenge to "subdue" the earth considerably toned down in the second chapter, where man is merely given leave to "till" and "keep" the garden of Eden, but the account of the creation of woman, formed from one of Adam's ribs to be his companion and helper, cannot be edifying to champions of feminism. Then, too, there is the story of the fall of man and his permanent expulsion from paradise. It is bad enough that Eve, as the first to yield to the serpent's blandishments, implicitly gets most of the blame; but even worse is the seeming disproportion between the offense and the punishment: to be banished forever from paradise, saddled with pain, conflict, and mortality, all for a single act of disobedience.

The basic plot of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* is itself a familiar variation on the story of the fall, replete with the prospect of redemption in the last act. It goes something like this: In the first two centuries following the death of Jesus, Christians were a diverse, noble, but persecuted lot, who tended to champion moral freedom and other good things; believing that the kingdom of God was at hand—that the Second Coming was just around the corner—many of the more enthusiastic Christians abstained from marriage and sexual relations, not because they thought sexuality was inherently evil but because they thought it a distraction from their spiritual vocation; as the Second Coming repeatedly failed to materialize, however, the Church grew ever more powerful, institutionalized, and intolerant of diversity; with the arrival of St. Augustine, intolerance was elevated into dogma, as Augustine effectively denied free will, equated sexuality with sin, propagated the dour notion of original sin, and set about persecuting those who disagreed with him; since Augustine's unpleasant view of human nature won out and became accepted as orthodox, Western civilization has been burdened with a bleak, patriarchal, and repressive view of sexuality and human nature for over sixteen hundred years; due to our recent enlightenment, however, we are now at last in a position to question, and even, perhaps, to correct, the baneful effects of that Augustinean legacy—"to reassess and qualify," as Professor Pagels puts it in her epilogue, Augustine's "singular dominance in much of Western Christian history."

As in *The Gnostic Gospels*, Professor Pagels makes her case here mostly by indirection. But while she is too wary simply to assert her allegiances, she makes her preferences abundantly clear. We have many asides about "male domination" and so on, as well as numerous comments of correct ideological sentiment but questionable historical subtlety. For example, early on in the book we read that the common Jewish practice of "both polygamy and divorce . . . increased opportunities for reproduction—not for women, but for the men who wrote the laws and benefited from them"—as if women, too, did not "benefit" from the laws. Sometimes, when she has occasion to deal with gnosticism, Professor Pagels waxes misty. Comparing a gnostic reading of the Genesis creation story with the traditional interpretation, for example, she enthusiastically points out that the gnostic reading is "not so much *history with a moral* as *myth with meaning*." What exactly this portends is not immediately graspable—except, of course, that myths with "meaning" are to be preferred to histories with only a "moral." But Professor Pagels proceeds to expand on the virtues of the gnostic method of interpretation: "Read this way," she explains, "the text became a shimmering surface of symbols, inviting the spiritually adventurous to explore its hidden depths, to draw upon their own inner experience—what artists call the creative imagination—to interpret the story." How much pleasanter to be "spiritually adventurous," to indulge "what artists call the creative imagination," than to be

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content with ordinary reading and so unexciting a thing as a moral.

A good example of the tenor of Professor Pagels's discussion is provided by the opening of her fifth chapter, "The Politics of Paradise," which begins her re-evaluation of Augustine's theological and social legacy.

> Are human beings capable of governing themselves? Defiant Christians hounded as criminals by the Roman government emphatically answer *yes*. But in the fourth and fifth centuries, after the emperors themselves became patrons of Christianity, the majority of Christians gradually came to say *no*.

It is a bit difficult to know quite how to respond to this flourish. Since human beings always *have* governed themselves in one way or another, it is clear that the question is mostly rhetorical: "Are human beings capable of governing themselves according to a scheme that I consider appropriately liberal and enlightened?"—something like that would seem to be the real tendency of her question. Professor Pagels's chief argument is that as Christianity became institutionalized, it switched from being a religion of "moral freedom" to being "an ideology... of universal corruption." Instead of believing that "the 'good news' of Christianity meant autonomy," as she tells us some early Christians did, Christians increasingly held, after Augustine, that mankind was hopelessly depraved and required the strong hand of an authoritarian government to restrain it.

While Professor Pagels does not go so far as to assert that Augustine promulgated the doctrine of original sin *because* it accorded with the nefarious, authoritarian forces of the Empire, she clearly suggests that Augustine's theology was officially preferred to its competitors in part because it provided a convenient rationale for "the uneasy alliance between the Catholic churches and imperial power." Throughout her discussion of the consolidation of orthodox Christian doctrine one finds odd formulations that compromise on accuracy and precision for the sake of innuendo: "Augustine ... having denied that human beings possess any capacity whatever for free will, accepts a definition of liberty far more agreeable to the powerful and influential men with whom he wholeheartedly identifies." (It may be worth noting that Augustine did not exactly deny "that human beings possess any capacity whatever for free will"; rather, he denied that man could achieve the good through the unaided exercise of his will: "Freedom is sufficient for evil," he wrote; "for good it is not enough unless it be empowered by the Omnipotent who is good.")

Now there are many things that might be said about Professor Pagels's exposition. One might, for example, inquire to what extent *any* form of traditional Christianity would equate human freedom with *autonomy*, since it is a basic tenet of Christianity that the moral law comes not from humanity but from God. It is in this sense that Augustine castigated the desire for autonomy—the desire, that is to say, to found morals not on God's law but on oneself—as an example of pride. For "what is pride," Augustine asked in the *City of God*, "except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be fixed, and to become, as it were, based on oneself."

But more generally, one might ask whether, in reading the development of Christianity in the image of Augustine, Professor Pagels has not tended to conflate the origin of certain Christian doctrines with their mature form. Indeed, much of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* seems predicated on a kind of genetic fallacy, confusing the historical and social circumstances of a doctrine's origin with its meaning. But, here as elsewhere, the reasons one might advance for justifying certain beliefs or doctrines are quite distinct from the story of how they happened to arise. Furthermore, it is not clear that, on these issues, Augustine's teaching has been quite so dominant an influence on mainstream Christianity as

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Professor Pagels would have us believe. She herself notes that "orthodox Christians affirmed the natural order" in a way that Augustine would find unacceptable. Or consider the issue of free will. It is true that in his late works Augustine greatly circumscribed the efficacy of man's will, believing, as he put in the *City of God*, that "creation has been so made that it is to man's advantage to be in subjection to God, and it is calamitous for him to act according to his own will." But it is by no means clear that Augustine's position on this point was accepted by the Church without serious qualification. To turn again to Aquinas, one notes that while he often appeals to Augustine's authority, he happily parts company with him when it suits his own interests—the interests, that is to say, of orthodoxy. Thus Aquinas affirms that man has free will, pragmatically observing that "otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain."

Yet the real burden of Professor Pagels's argument with Augustine does not turn on this or that theological nicety but on a deeply felt conviction that the Augustinian legacy has helped to perpetuate divisive social and political structures as well as a general sense of spiritual impotence. "What, then," she steps back to ask at one point, "can remedy human misery? How can anyone achieve internal balance, much less establish social and political harmony between man and woman, man and man? Augustine's whole theology of the fall depends upon his radical claim that no human power can effect such restoration." As this passage suggests, implicit in Professor Pagels's discussion is a version of what we might call the Perfectibility Thesis, the notion that human nature is infinitely malleable and, indeed, perfectible, that evil is a remediable part of human nature, and hence that what the tradition calls original sin is reversible.

In one form or another, this optimistic—some would say naïve—view of mankind has exercised a tantalizing appeal for millennia. In Augustine's time, one of its chief representatives was the British monk Pelagius, who proclaimed the natural goodness of mankind and denied the doctrine of original sin and hence the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism. Nor is it surprising that, despite her demurrals, Professor Pagels should come down firmly on the side of Pelagius in her discussion of Augustine's criticism of Pelagianism. Pelagius has always been a hero of those inclined to a rosy view of human nature; and the fact that his controversy with Augustine led to his exile has also made him into something of a heterodox martyr as well. At the center of Pelagius's teaching was the conviction—the "terrifying" conviction, as one commentator put it—that "since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory." Because Pelagius regarded sin and evil as remediable accidents of human nature, because he believed in the natural goodness of mankind, he had no patience with sin, weakness, imperfection. As Peter Brown notes in his excellent biography of Augustine,

> for the Pelagians, man has no excuse for his own sins, nor for the evils around him. If human nature was essentially free and well-created, and not dogged by some mysterious inner weakness, the reason for the general misery of men must be somehow external to their true selves; it must lie, in part, in the constricting force of the social habits of a pagan past. Such habits could be reformed.

Thus there is a reason that orthodox Christianity has traditionally regarded the fall as a *felix culpa*, a happy fall. Not only did man's expulsion from paradise present the possibility of redemption, but it also removed from mankind the burden of believing that perfection was within its grasp. Since man is inherently fallible, needy, prone to sin, his failure to avoid evil or achieve perfection is an accepted part of the orthodox vision of humanity. It is here, whatever one's theological predilections or commitments, that one sees the profound *psychological* truth of the Genesis account of

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the origin and nature of mankind. And it is from this perspective, as Peter Brown goes on to note, that "the victory of Augustine over Pelagius was also a victory for the average good Catholic layman of the Later [Roman] Empire, over an austere reforming ideal."

One important way in which the Perfectibility Thesis expresses itself in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* is the assumption that since our attitudes toward sexuality, gender, and so on are the result of accidental historical decisions that were basically political, we can now change them for the better, i.e., change them to accord with our own more enlightened blueprint of human nature. This, of course, is a thoroughly political ambition, and it is most instructive to consider how Professor Pagels deals with the implications of her argument. In a revealing passage near the end of her introduction, she takes issue with the "misunderstanding" expressed by one of her colleagues who, responding to this book and to *The Gnostic Gospels*, contended that religious ideas cannot be reduced to political "agendas." Professor Pagels is quick to agree—who wants to be accused of reducing things to political agendas?—but then goes on to argue that "religious insights and moral choices . . . coincide with practical ones." The reader who wonders what this exquisitely vague formulation might mean is given a clue in the next paragraph. "What I am thinking of," she explains, "is what the anthropologist [*sic*] Foucault calls 'the politics of truth'—that is, what each of us perceives and acts upon as true has much to do with our situation, social, political, cultural, religious, or philosophical."

The reassuring emptiness of the explanatory phrase—"has much to do with our situation," etc.—does not alter the fact that what the "anthropologist" Michel Foucault meant by "the politics of truth" was simply that truth has no independent value or existence, that at bottom truth is a kind of political or social booty appropriated by those in whose hands cultural power has been concentrated. It follows from this, as Foucault points out in his well-known essay "Truth and Power," that his aim is not to emancipate intellectual inquiry from politics—an idea he discards as a "chimera"—but to detach "the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time." In other words, from this point of view truth is merely a pawn in a struggle that is essentially political, and since the "social, economic, and cultural" interests it serves "at the present time" are repressive, one is licensed to emancipate truth from those ruling interests and to put it in the service of other, more laudable, "forms of hegemony."

Professor Pagels concludes *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* by claiming that the important thing is not taking "sides" on these "specific issues" but rather the "recognition of a spiritual dimension in human experience." It is a curious irony, then, that the unremitting message of her book is that the "spiritual dimension in human experience" is inextricably political, that without recourse to specific—and specifically political—issues, human spirituality remains in thrall to what Foucault, indeed, called the politics of truth.

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"Out of it ere night": the WASP gentleman as cultural ideal

by Jeffrey Hart

On the morning of September 20, 1643, Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, died at age thirty-three in cavalry action before the town of Newbury. A scholar and poet, an intimate of Ben Jonson, Thomas Hobbes, John Selden, Clarendon, and Davenant, he embodied in many ways the ideal of his period. His was not an absolutely first-rate mind, like those of Hobbes or Selden. They were, to put it one way, too surpassingly intelligent to be representative of anything. But Falkland did embody an ideal. He was an English gentleman as his era understood the idea. He was a man of great moderation, and in the House of Commons he often supported the reformers. He distrusted the power and arrogance of men like Bishop Laud. He had a broad definition of the Church of England, and held to reason and religious toleration. But he grew increasingly frightened by men like Cromwell, Hampden, and Pym. When revolution and civil war loomed imminent, Falkland stood with the King as advisor and cavalry officer.

His superlative personal qualities grew in his own eyes increasingly irrelevant to the history that unfolded before him. The air of England reeked of cannon smoke, and her soil was drenched in blood. The King was duplicitous and a victim of bad advice. The long afternoons of discourse at Great Tew, the Falkland family estate in Oxfordshire, might as well have been on another planet. Falkland's philosophical and platonic friend Lady Sophia Murray was imprisoned in London as a spy and traitor, involved by Falkland himself in a feckless plot. She died of consumption on the same day—legend says the same hour—that Falkland in effect committed suicide on the field of battle.

For months Falkland had been sunk in melancholy, and had become uncharacteristically careless about his dress. On the morning before the battle, however, he called for fresh linen, took communion, declared that he would be "out of it ere night," and took his place on the right wing of the King's line of cavalry.

The King's infantry were finding it impossible to force their way past a hedgerow manned by Essex's Parliamentary musketeers. The only way through was a narrow opening in the hedge, a bottleneck of slaughtered royalists. Suddenly Falkland and his horse sprang forward and plunged toward the gap. Before he reached it, he was mortally wounded in the stomach. A few minutes later, the rest of the King's cavalry plunged through the gap, widening it, and routing Essex's musketmen. Falkland was buried in a small church at Great Tew.

Falkland exemplified one phase of the idea of the English gentleman, an idea which has remote classical and Christian roots but which can be discerned early in Chaucer's "verray parfit gentil knicht" and later in such Renaissance works as Castiglione's *The Courtier* and its English counterpart, Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governour*, and, of course, in the legend of Sir Philip Sidney.

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The idea undergoes a chilling formulation in Lord Chesterfield's conduct-manual letters to his illegitimate son, and becomes broadened and more widely accessible in the *Spectator* essays of Addison and Steele. Gradually the idea takes on a distinctively English character, different from anything on the Continent. In the late eighteenth century, the idea importantly incorporates the idea of sports: riding to hounds, cricket, boxing, rugby. Dr. Thomas Arnold reformed the school at Rugby in order to produce Christian gentlemen; his son Matthew Arnold celebrated the idea in a little-known essay entitled "An Eton Boy," about Arthur Clynton Baskerville Mynors, who died during the campaign against the Zulus. "We see him," writes Arnold, "full of natural affection, and not ashamed of manifesting it; bred in habits of religion, and not ashamed of retaining them; without a speck of affectation, without a shadow of pretension, unsullied, brave, true, kind, respectful, grateful, uncensorious, uncomplaining; in the time to act, cheerfully active; in the time to suffer, cheerfully enduring." The British scholar Philip Mason, in *The English Gentleman: The Rise and Fall of an Ideal* (Morrow, 1982), provides a very rich account of the development of the ideal.

I believe it can be argued that the idea of the gentleman, modified in its American context, but certainly derived from the British model and not at all from anything on the Continent, and involving matters of style and conduct comparable to the British model, has been since the eighteenth century the only persisting social ideal in American culture. Nothing has filled the gap left by its relatively recent disappearance, certainly not the Cowboy, or the Redskin-ized Natty Bumppo figure from Cooper. The evisceration of the idea of the gentleman is the central subject of, for example, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* and the idea may even lurk back there somewhere beneath the arguments of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind.*

If the idea of the gentleman came under intolerable strain for Falkland during the seventeenth-century civil war, the mechanized slaughter of World War I brought comparable strains to bear upon it. In this connection many representative figures might be adduced. Scott Fitzgerald's gentlemen *manqués* represent a tribute to the ideal, though they are usually tragic figures, undone through illusion or weak character. Faulkner's gentlemen are no match for the Snopeses and modernity. Hemingway sought to fashion a new, partially Redskin-ized, ideal.

The representative figure to set beside Falkland might be the equally doomed American legendary figure Hobey Baker, who met a Falkland-like fate in 1918. Baker has been a figure of enduring interest. Fitzgerald was fascinated by him. John Davies's *The Legend of Hobey Baker* (Little, Brown, 1966), with an introduction by the Fitzgerald scholar Arthur Mizener, provides an accurate account of him, with numerous photographs. And most recently we have had a fine novel about Baker by Mark Goodman, entitled *Hurrah for the Next Man Who Dies* (Atheneum, 1985). Mr. Goodman is aware of all that the scholars can tell us about Baker, but he uses the genre of the novel to push, quite reasonably in my view, into areas where the historian cannot tread. This *beau idéal* of American society in the period before the Great War, in Mr. Goodman's view, killed himself even as Falkland did, unable to deal with a world in which his very excellence was becoming marginal.

The title of this novel is thoroughly appropriate, though it is also obscure. Except to the initiate, *Hurrah for the Next Man Who Dies* certainly sounds perverse; and, except to the initiate, does not provide a clue to what the novel is about. And yet you know from the first paragraph that the prose here is full of what the eighteenth century called "energy," by which was meant inventive combinations of words within the sentence, always within the boundaries of usage, of course, but exhibiting the sheer pleasure of using the language.

Structurally, this novel owes much to *Gatsby,* even as *Gatsby* owes everything, structurally, to Conrad. We have a recog-

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nizably normal narrator—like Carraway or Marlow—gradually bringing us into the vicinity of a baroque tragic hero, Gatsby and Kurtz. Normality is what we stuff graveyards with and forget about. The tragic hero is unforgettable, though he usually dies young.

Goodman's normal narrator is one Jeb Runcible, a young Southerner who goes north to Princeton, plays football, and goes to war. The tragic hero is Hobey Baker.

Most readers today will know little or nothing about Hobart Amory Hare Baker (1892-1918). Those who have written about Baker do not shrink from comparing him with Sir Philip Sidney, or Yeats's Irish airman, Major Robert Gregory. Baker may have been the greatest college athlete ever to appear on an American playing field. He was the only athlete ever to be elected to both the football and the hockey hall of fame. Though he played football in that distant prewar era, when the game was almost entirely defensive, the ball larger and rounder than it is today, when a touchdown counted for five points and scarcely anyone threw forward passes, Baker held the Princeton scoring record of a hundred and eighty points until 1964, when Cosmo Iacavazzi, who carried the ball on almost every play, surpassed it in his final game.

But Baker was more than a superb athlete. He was the epitome of what pre-World War I upper-class America ardently desired. A Philadelphia aristocrat, a product of St. Paul's School, he had perfect manners, was a member of the choir, a Christmas caroler, and a good if not brilliant student. He also looked like a young man in one of Charles Dana Gibson's drawings.

College football in the Ivy League when Baker played was a very different game from what it is today. Our principal source of nonfictional knowledge about Baker is *The Legend of Hobey Baker* by Professor John Davies. Here is the milieu within which Baker became a legend:

> Within the colleges, of course, football was a sort of civic religion. At Princeton the week before a Harvard or Yale game the tension was palpable, the professors unable to get the attention or even the attendance of the students. The coaches would bring back old-time stars to romp around the field demonstrating old stunts and exhorting the team to victory; there were mass meetings and torchlight parades . . . . In the fall of 1912 Governor Woodrow Wilson went down to practice three times, including the day of his election as President of the United States.

Even at his peak, as a national hero of the upper-middle and upper class, Baker loathed publicity. He saw the game as larger than any individual. When he was deliberately fouled in football or hockey, the deed reduced him to tears, not because he had been hurt but because the game had been tainted. More than once he carried an unconscious opponent off the field in his arms, and after a game, hammered and bloody, he always went into the opposing team's locker room to congratulate them on a fine game. The sportswriter John R. Tunis remembered Baker as "a kind of panther. His coordination and footwork were so wonderful that he could take chances and do things that others wouldn't dare do . . . . He would dropkick, tackle, and run with a kind of feline intelligence . . . . The whole atmosphere was electric when he was playing. Everyone would just stand up when he got the puck or caught a punt. Never wore a headguard in football and I remember that great shock of blond hair—Hobey standing waiting all alone."

Never wore a headguard in football. In the old photographs, Baker is the only man on the field without one. He was what his era desired but he was also a cultural throwback, an Edwardian gentleman who had internalized the entire ethos, though in his world of 1914 the manners and morals of the 1920s were already gestating in the back seats of thousands of Henry Ford's new motor cars.

Mark Goodman's novel is divided into two books, peace and war. What one sees in the first book, among other things, is that there was in Hobey Baker's time a much denser texture to college life than there would be even a decade later (and certainly

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than there is today). It was a texture with its unfortunate and even absurd characteristics, but nevertheless there was something *there*—style, expectation, tradition, a code of manners (no one wanted to be a "mucker"), a conception of the heroic, a standard of intelligence, even *dating*: chrysanthemums at the railroad station, fur coats and cashmere sweaters, the old songs. Goodman captures this world with a sure eye and ear, and he has learned from Fitzgerald how to weave in the songs. On our present college campuses, all of this has been homogenized into a kind of stylistic glop.

But there is a mystery clinging to Hobey Baker, and it has to do with his last years and the manner of his death at age twenty-six in 1918. It is to this mystery that Mr. Goodman addresses himself; he knows all the facts and speaks with authority; and he tries as a novelist to come as close as he can to the heart of the mystery. The plain fact of the matter is that Baker did not have to die. Indeed, there was no excuse for it.

The bare facts are elegantly presented by Professor Davies. After graduating from Princeton in 1914, Baker was bored with his Wall Street job at the Morgan bank and bored with Manhattan social life. He sought some excitement in playing hockey against pro teams with the St. Nick's club, half of whose players had personal valets in attendance. He took flying lessons out on Long Island, played polo, knew Eddie Rickenbacker, raced automobiles around Long Island, and ended up as a volunteer in the Lafayette Escadrille. The newspapers exaggerated his exploits, but he did shoot down three German planes. He rose to squadron commander, and had the squadron's planes painted Princeton orange and black, with a tiger logo. On December 22, 1918, the war over, he test-flew a repaired Spad. The engine stalled, the Spad crashed, and Baker died.

Well, Baker knew very well what you are supposed to do in a stall, and he had taught his own pilots how to handle such a situation. That Spad was a sort of varnished cloth kite with a motorcycle engine. What you do in a stall is push the stick forward to gather some flying speed in a shallow dive, then pull the stick back, and pancake the thing. No problem. Spads had pancaked onto treetops. Some pilots had walked away from a dozen such landings. But Baker tried to glide back to the airstrip, and instead crashed into the ground nose-first.

Was it a suicide? Professor Davies says absolutely not. Mark Goodman is not so sure.

The exuberance and accuracy of Mark Goodman's historical imagination are tremendously impressive, whether he is recreating prewar Princeton and Manhattan or the Western Front. "It rained over most of northern France the day we buried Hobey Baker." A fine, simple, but resonant opening sentence. "The weather bore in from the North Sea well before dawn, silent and thick with mist . . . . The squadron—or what was left of it, more than a month after the Armistice—had to fall out for burial parade shortly after morning mess."

Those are the opening sentences of the novel, Jeb Runcible speaking. They properly put Baker's death in the foreground, and, not at all incidentally, recall Gatsby's funeral in the rain, Gatsby, the last frontiersman, and Baker, the last Edwardian.

Mark Goodman's Book I deals with the prewar college and social scene, and with Baker as an ideal figure; and his prose is more than adequate to this task.

> Hobey Baker, golden youth of autumn fields and winter ice. In that gilded age of the American romance, when our country marched into the new century vibrant and full-blooded, flexing its muscles and stretching its sinews, we worshipped our athletes in the robust conviction that they, not our great and fearsome machines, were the best we had to offer. They were, too. Willie Anderson, with a golf swing like a hawk leaping to flight; Jim Thorpe, the exquisite Carlisle Indian . . . and my own hero, Christy Mathewson, who threw a small stitched sphere faster than the eye could follow. But none quite captured the national imagination like Hobey Baker, the athlete aristocrat, who

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> played with a swift and innocent grace that seemed an affirmation of man's mortal divinity. "Here he comes!" they would cry as he flew up the ice with the puck cradled in his stick.

Or, on the football field:

> THUMP! The Harvard punt soars upfield toward our goal line, where Hobey waits, alone, his black jersey emblazoned with grime, his blond hair shining in the pellucid sunlight. He flexes on the toes of his cleats, hands fixed on his hips, as he gauges the ball's trajectory. He is perfectly still in the penultimate moment when the ball crests and begins to descend. Suddenly he backpedals three, four, five steps, plants, then dashes forward, his timing marvellous, to catch the punt on the fly.

This is the Hobey Baker who astonished the young Scott Fitzgerald, and there is surely no call for intellectuals to condescend to him. An athlete of that quality is an artist on a par with the great ballet dancers. Here is how Amory Blaine, the name derived from Baker's, sees Allenby—or Baker—in *This Side of Paradise*:

> Now, far down the shadowy line of University Place a white-clad phalanx broke the gloom, and marching figures, white-shirted, white-trousered, swung rhythmically up the street, with linked arms and heads thrown back, singing "Going Back to Nassau Hall" . . . . There at the head of the white platoon marched Allenby, the football captain, slim and defiant, as if aware that this year the hopes of the college rested on him, that his hundred-and-sixty pounds were expected to dodge to victory through the heavy blue and crimson lines . . . and then the procession passed through shadowy Campbell Arch and the voices grew fainter as it wound eastward over the campus.

But even in these silvery settings there are touches of shadow. In Harris's novel, Jeb Runcible's intelligent but troubled girlfriend Julia Brewer notices something enormously solitary about Hobey Baker, recalling him on the football field earlier on a Saturday: "There was something spectacular and . . . solitary about it. Is that the word? Yes, solitary. As if he were the only person on the field. I mean, as if he *felt* that way." And here we remember the child Hobey Baker at St. Paul's, practicing on those frozen ponds late at night, Baker the solitary perfectionist.

The great revelatory moment in the first half of Harris's book comes when Runcible sees Baker in his ultimate narcissistic solitude. It is like Nick Carraway seeing Gatsby for the first time, stretching out his arms toward the green light.

> It happened one evening when I returned early from the library and suddenly found Hobey stripped to the waist before his mirror. His back was to me, and as I stood there for a startled moment, he held his arm extended and flexed, watching its ripple with a ferocity of wonder I have never encountered in another human being. His eyes caught me in the mirror.
>
> "Just look at that arm," he whispered. "Do you know what that arm can do?"
>
> Then, as if he had just realized my actual presence, he quickly dropped the pose and made some remark of humorous disparagement.
>
> The incident went forever unmentioned. But as long as Hobey lived, I never, never forgot the glittering intensity in those eyes, cold and bright as diamonds, as he stood captive to the silver mirror.
>
> Let it be said, though, that with that arm and its mate, Hobey could juggle five balls in the air at a time. He could run the hundred-yard dash in ten seconds, make any muscle in his body jiggle to the accompaniment of a dance tune—and, to be sure, dress up in white tie and tails and join a delightful dinner company walking on his hands.

In Goodman's interpretation, and remember that this is fiction, Hobey Baker, while absolutely correct around women, always Edwardian in his manners, averting his gaze from all the backseat rumpus and never participating in the callow sexual bull sessions, was also emotionally odd.

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> "What's it like, Jeb?" he asked earnestly. "I mean, what does it actually feel like, to be in love with someone?"

After some exchanges, during which Runcible stumblingly tries to explain the feeling, Hobey replies:

> "I'm not sure I could ever feel that way about someone . . . . I'd feel I was losing control, I hate that . . . . I can't stand not being in control of . . . things."

This exchange occurs in a chapter of Book I entitled "Roll Me Over in the Clover."

When Baker and Jeb graduate in 1914, Goodman pays his wry respects to his fictional mentor, Scott Fitzgerald:

> Suddenly, while he poured and we drank, a rather square-cut underclassman with startling green eyes ran up to us and planted himself in front of Hobey.
>
> "Excuse the intrusion, Mr. Baker," he began breathlessly, "but on behalf of our class I wanted to congratulate you on a splendid career. You were a source of inspiration to all of us, and it was an honor to have the privilege of seeing you play."
>
> "Why, thank you," said Hobey, plainly taken aback.
>
> "Then"—the youngster's hand shot out—"all the luck in the world to you, Mister Baker."
>
> Gravely Hobey shook the outstretched hand; then the lad was off like a powder flash.
>
> "Who the devil was *that*?" Hobey asked after a stunned pause.
>
> "That's young Fitzgerald," I said, remembering. "You know, Hobe—the fellow who quit freshman football the first week?"
>
> We all watched the eager youngster disappear into the crowd.
>
> "Well," Spratling said at length, "he does go on, doesn't he?"

After Princeton and a dispiriting taste of "real" life at the Morgan bank, Hobey takes to the air, and in a fine scene Goodman depicts his farewell, flying over the Princeton stadium in formation.

> It was an extraordinary sight, Hobey Baker flying point for a V formation of mechanized geese, flying south to Princeton for November. They came over high, stretched out against the darkening autumn sky, then banked and swooped in low over the stadium. As the bobbing planes receded upward, Hobey broke off from the formation and passed over the stadium one last time, dipping his wings in a final salute as the crowd rose and cheered.

Soon thereafter we are into Book II and France, with Runcible a flyer now, too. Goodman is a master of the strong opening sentence: "Of all Nungesser's stories, my favorite was the tale of Albert Ball," the great and eccentric British ace. And now we find out what the mysterious title of this novel means. "Word of Guynemer's death got around quickly . . . . We all got pretty well oiled up. Toward the shank of the evening, when everyone was in full funereal throttle, one of the British captains who had known Guynemer stood up on the bar and led the group in a chorus of 'Hurrah For the Next Man Who Dies.'"

> So stand by your glasses steady!
> For this world is a world of lies,
> Here's a toast to the dead already,
> And hurrah for the next man who dies.

The flyers, however, though indeed they frequently die, remain literally and emotionally above the war. Hobey is very good at what he does, high above the clouds, which he refers to as "cloud fields." He resists the reality of the whole thing. He and Runcible walk down the road from their chateau billet to enjoy a good meal with a French peasant couple. Hobey asks the peasant woman whether they have any children.

> "They was in the Army," she said . . . . "One was shot in the head at the First Marne. The other was blown to pieces at the Somme."

Hobey cops out by talking to the peasant woman about the merits of the Allied cause.

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Jeb Runcible comes down out of the clouds both literally and figuratively in one of the epiphanies of the novel, when he is shot down and crash-lands in no-man's land as a German attack is imminent. He manages to leap and crawl, dodging mortar fire and snipers, to the British lines. Both the attackers and the defenders break out in national songs, and even the bagpipes skirl, as the grey-uniformed wave sweeps forward. Runcible is put inside the command post.

> Outside, the shrieks and clang of metal told me the Germans had reached our trench. I jumped behind the desk as the dugout door was flung open. A skewered apparition, faceless, came hurtling into the room. It was a Tommy with a bayonet run clear through his back. The bayonet disappeared as he crashed into the table, half screaming, half gargling. Then he pitched forward to the floor. Standing over him, gore dripping from his recovered bayonet, was a German soldier. He could not have been more than sixteen years old. I remember his intense youth, and his startled look before I fired the pistol and ripped most of his face away.

Runcible has been feeling increasing distance from Baker by this time, and the break comes when he finally gets back to the chateau, where the atmosphere is much like that of the Ivy Club at Princeton.

> I slammed my drink down on the bar, sending broken glass skittering across the surface. "Hobey, will you for the love of God *please shut up*?"
>
> The room stopped dead. Hobey looked at me closely, as if he hadn't noticed me before . . . .
>
> I pointed vaguely eastward. "Do you understand this, Hobey? *That's not the bloody fucking Yale game out there.*"

Then, the death of Baker. Like Professor Davies, Mark Goodman wisely does not commit himself to a theory, but, as is his privilege as a novelist, he does push further. His narrator, Jeb Runcible, provides plenty of material for reflection.

As abundant evidence indicates, Hobey was bored with his peacetime role in Manhattan. "That's because you're afraid to die, Jeb. My problem is—what if I live?" "You know, Jeb," Hobey finally says, "I really am afraid to go back home. I just don't see what there is for me back there."

But then there is that scene, which actually happened, of Baker narcissistically regarding himself before the mirror. As Goodman portrays him, he can experience camaraderie of the Ivy Club variety, and also with his squadron. But he is not at all comfortable with women. He finds himself engaged, also a historical fact, to the veteran post-debutante Mimi Scott. She pursues him to France as a Red Cross nurse and forces him into an engagement. "One weekend proved so disastrous that Hobey cut short his leave and returned to the squadron Saturday night to fret on my shoulder. 'I certainly am good with girls, aren't I?'"

There is so much talk about homosexuality these days that the subject itself has become a stupefying bore. And yet—remembering, always, that Goodman is writing fiction, an *interpretation*—there is enough here that is soundly based in fact to suggest that Baker had great difficulty in relating not only to women but to anyone outside himself; at most, he could relate to the boys at Princeton, and then to the men of the squadron.

The war takes its toll on him, in this novel. He thickens at the waist and begins to grow bald. One may think of Baker that he had some intimation of his darker sexual impulses and feared their disclosure, especially in the ambience within which he grew up.

Gatsby, Kurtz, and now Hobey Baker—Mr. Goodman has given us a complex tragic hero indeed. And perhaps he has come as close as it is possible to get to the historical truth itself.

When Baker is buried on that rainy day in France, the dirge is really for the end of the era that produced him.

> . . . Still I will always be
> Nearer, my God, to Thee,

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Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee . . . .

"Mercifully the dirge ended, and a stillness lay for the moment over the misty French graveyard. Then the honor guard fired a final salute, and the ceremony was over. The generals and mayors and newspapermen climbed into their cars and went back to wherever they came from."

Hobart Amory Hare Baker was, from our present perspective, a college man from another planet, no, another galaxy. As Yeats wrote in his great elegy on Major Robert Gregory, "What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?"

Goodman's Hobey Baker is, in turn, a representative American hero, in the sense that Ahab, Gatsby, and Joe DiMaggio are representative, though of course not average. Their aloneness is a part of the intense focus of their individuality. And it is not often, to say the least, that there comes before us a novel as interesting, accomplished, and powerful as this one.

Quite probably the long line of American gentlemen ran out during the period following World War II, when WASP American aristocrats, untitled of course but solidly established, temporarily shaped the world. The American governing class was highly permeable, but certainly identifiable. Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas have provided a moving epitaph for this now historical mode of being in *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (Simon & Schuster, 1986), an account of six men who were what is now called cold-war liberals, and who were the designers of the international equation within which we now live.

Almost a caricature of the breed was Dean Acheson—Groton, Yale, Harvard Law, finally Secretary of State, "present at the creation" of NATO and the Truman Doctrine; after nine days of senatorial grilling over the firing of MacArthur, he announced that he was going to test the human capacity for absorbing alcohol. Charles "Chip" Bohlen was kicked out of St. Paul's, Hobey Baker's school, for playing football with an inflated condom but went to Harvard anyway and became a leading Russian expert and ambassador to Moscow. Robert Lovett, Hill School and Yale, led the Yale unit of the Reserve Flying Corps during World War I and was tapped for Skull and Bones not on the Old Campus but at a naval air station in West Palm Beach. He was later to play a key role as Secretary of Defense. During the Berlin airlift, he amused himself with amateur oil painting. John J. McCloy was born on the wrong side of the tracks in Philadelphia. On his deathbed, McCloy's clergyman father said: "Have John learn Greek." There followed the Peddie school, Amherst, football and tennis, High Commissioner for postwar Germany, President of the World Bank. McCloy's ideal: Periclean Athens. George Kennan, Princeton, ambassador to Moscow, architect of Truman's containment policy. Averell Harriman, millionaire, Harvard, ambassador, cold-war liberal.

The kind of social and political crystallization described in *The Wise Men* does not seem today to be even remotely conceivable as a real option. The institutions that helped to create and sustain them, from the prep schools to the Ivy League and the Episcopal Church, have entirely and essentially changed. There is almost nothing left within these institutions of serious cultural substance. Any revival of substance will require an enormous act of cultural re-imagining. And even in the loving account of these six "wise men" it is possible to detect signs of vulnerability. There is the profound sense of alienation in Kennan and Bohlen, the severe drinking problems of Bohlen and Acheson, the apparent bewilderment of Harriman in his negotiations—he really seems to have thought they were negotiations in the old sense—with the North Vietnamese. There was Acheson's famous flub in placing South Korea outside our defense perimeter, a goof that cost fifty thousand American lives. Was he drunk? And his loyalty to Hiss.

It was the end of the line, and the mold has been broken. Out of it ere night.

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Under the aspect of eternity: the fiction of Flannery O'Connor

by Bruce Bawer

It is a measure of her greatness, perhaps, that although she would be only sixty-four years old if she were still among us, Flannery O'Connor—who passed away a quarter-century ago in her native Georgia, at the age of thirty-nine—seems already to belong to the ages. Typically, an author's literary reputation declines precipitously once he is no longer around to keep it going, but O'Connor's reputation has grown steadily in the years since her death; her two extremely impressive (if ultimately unsuccessful) novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), have continued to earn the respect and interest of intelligent readers, and—far more important—a number of her three dozen or so short stories, the majority of which appeared originally in either *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) or *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), have deservedly attained the status of classics in the genre. Indeed, though her position as a novelist is highly arguable, it seems eminently fair to say that the career of Flannery O'Connor, like the careers of Hawthorne, Poe, Stephen Crane, and Henry James before her, constitutes a major chapter in the history of the American short story. How appropriate, then, that the publishers of the splendid Library of America series, whose list of collected works already includes all or part of the oeuvres of the aforementioned nineteenth-century masters, have seen fit to add the name of Flannery O'Connor to that distinguished roster—a selection which makes her, whether by design or happenstance, the first author born in the twentieth century to appear in the Library of America series.[1]

Yet O'Connor is a twentieth-century writer with a difference. In an age when serious authors were all but expected to experiment with form and style, to disavow or rewrite the conventional Judeo-Christian moral code, or at least to exhibit a few unmistakable signs of alienation and nihilism, O'Connor did none of the above. She was a literary rebel, but not in any of the approved ways. She rebelled, rather, by attaching herself fervently to a distinct set of traditional—and, in the corridors of American literary power, decidedly bewildering—ideas about the human condition. Those ideas, as she explains in a handful of cogent essays which have been reprinted in the Library of America volume, derive largely from her devout Roman Catholicism. "[W]hen I look at stories I have written," she observes in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," "I find that they are, for the most part, about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little—or at best a distorted—sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions do not

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1 *Collected Works*, by Flannery O'Connor; edited by Sally Fitzgerald; Library of America, 1281 pages, $30. Includes *Wise Blood, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, The Violent Bear It Away, Everything That Rises Must Converge, Essays and Letters.*

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apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life." These characters, she adds, are often described as "grotesque," and the stories themselves are criticized by some for their violence.

Why does O'Connor write about such unfortunate, spiritually deprived people? Largely, she explains, because she wants to write about spiritual redemption. "[F]or me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and . . . what I see in the world I see in relation to that." Since the South is "Christ-haunted," poor Southerners make the best subjects, because "[w]hen the poor hold sacred history in common, they have concrete ties to the universal and holy which allow the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity." As for the supposed grotesqueness of her vision, she argues that "writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable." For "[t]he novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience." Her fiction is violent, in other words, because when your audience does not hold the same beliefs that you do, "then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

So it is that both of O'Connor's novels are about wildly unbalanced young fellows who, in the course of resisting their true spiritual vocation—that of prophet—go so far as to commit murder. *Wise Blood* presents us with twenty-two-year-old Hazel Motes, whose grandfather was a small-town Tennessee circuit preacher and who at the age of twelve knew that he, too, was going to be one. Yet Haze, resisting the truth of Christ's sacrifice ("I don't need Jesus . . . . What do I need with Jesus?"), goes to the city of Taulkinham to preach "a new church—the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified." When his idea is stolen by a cynical local operator, Haze furiously kills the operator's hired prophet and then blinds himself. Similarly, *The Violent Bear It Away* sets before us the case of fourteen-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater, whose uncle, a fanatical backwoods prophet, raised him to be a prophet as well. After the old man's death, the boy finds his way to the house of his other uncle, a young widower and urban schoolteacher named Rayber who was similarly raised but who (despite the constant pull of his childhood beliefs) has struggled to believe only in reason. Rayber, who seeks to break Tarwater of his faith, knows that the boy has been enjoined by the old prophet to baptize Rayber's small retarded son, and assumes this is why the boy has come; yet Tarwater, like him, is engaged in a struggle against the old man's teachings, a struggle which concludes with Tarwater drowning the retarded boy and (at the last minute) also baptizing him, and which leads finally to his acceptance of his prophetic vocation.

There are several reasons why these novels are less effective than O'Connor's stories. In many ways, O'Connor's talents were more suited to short-form than to long-form fiction; both her novels feel episodic and repetitive, deficient in the shape, tautness, and resonance of her stories. But there can be little doubt that many readers' lingering discomfort with the novels relates directly to the fact that their protagonists are prophets—or, more precisely, prophets-in-the-making—and that it is in the matter of prophecy, perhaps, that O'Connor's convictions are most drastically at odds with those of the average modern secular reader. To such a reader, Haze and Tarwater are about as far from sympathetic characters as one could get: they're mad, they're monotonous, they're murderous. To O'Connor, however, these characters' passion—murderous though it may be—is, in the deepest sense, not mad but holy; these young men are not out of touch with reality but have gazed upon (or at least glimpsed) a profounder

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reality than the rest of us know, a reality with which we, not they, are out of touch. If the sight of it has driven them to insane acts, it is not because they are themselves insane but because of the impediments to the attainment of grace that have been thrown in their paths by modern civilization.

What, one may ask, would draw a Catholic novelist to treat so Protestant a theme as Bible-thumping Southern fundamentalism? O'Connor answers this question in an essay entitled "The Catholic Novelist in the South." Such a novelist, she explains,

> is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. His interests and sympathies may very well go, as I find my own do, directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill. The Catholic novelist in the South will see many distorted images of Christ, but he will certainly feel that a distorted image of Christ is better than no image at all. I think he will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development.

Many of us, I think, would have trouble agreeing that "a distorted image of Christ is better than no image at all." There are distortions, after all, and there are distortions; and a Christ turned into a murderer or a rapist, say, is no Christ. What O'Connor is effectively saying, in this unusual apologia, is that Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater may be murderers, but at least they have passion. If the rest of us don't find ourselves tempted, as they are, to commit acts of violence, it's not because we're better than they but probably because, on the profoundest level, we're dead to the world. For this reader, anyway, such an argument falls a good distance short of convincing; surely, if the world and characters of *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* are meant to correspond in any manner whatsoever to the real world and to actual human beings, the conclusion cannot be avoided that both Haze and Tarwater are insane, and that Tarwater's acceptance of the role of prophet is hardly a consummation devoutly to be wished. One may, to be sure, line up behind such critics as Dorothy Tuck McFarland, who considers O'Connor's second novel "an objective correlative, as it were, of man's experience before the Infinite." Yet in the final analysis, both novels demand that one throw psychological complexity overboard—and despite the abundance of beautifully written passages and dramatically powerful episodes, neither novel manages to persuade the typical modern reader to do so. To such a reader, these novels must remain, in the end, case studies not in religious passion but in abnormal psychology—indeed, in psychology that is much too abnormal to seem particularly relevant to one's own experience of life.

No such difficulty, to say the least, attends the reading of O'Connor's short stories. Few of these stories, for one thing, directly concern preachers and prophets; none involves itself overmuch with the relation between madness and godhead. They are in fact more catholic than Catholic, accessible in every way to all readers of good will; more than that, they are magnificently affecting stories, capable of exerting an astonishingly powerful effect upon the reader's sensibilities (about which more later). Yet, like many great writers, O'Connor possesses a voice and a vision to which even a highly sensitive and intelligent reader may not immediately respond, and which may actually, for many reasons, put him off at first blush. Certainly a contemporary reader who comes to O'Connor with the standard notion of post-World War Two American fiction—a notion, that is, which has been formed by a steady diet of Mailer, Updike, Roth, Kerouac, and the like—may face a certain

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amount of difficulty in becoming accustomed to her distinctive way of seeing the world.

For though they may (for the most part) maintain a respectable distance from the fanatical prophets of the world, O'Connor's stories are possessed of an intense religious feeling, a feeling that has continued to spawn, as it did during O'Connor's lifetime, a considerable degree of controversy, and to disturb some readers more than it should. There is no question but that, to many a contemporary reader, the mere presence in O'Connor's stories of words like grace and redemption and of images of Christ, Satan, and the Holy Ghost makes her seem as remote a figure as Hawthorne himself; without question, her grim preoccupation with mystery and evil, coupled with her thoroughly traditional approach to style and form and character, recalls the author of *The Scarlet Letter* far more than it does any contemporary writer of note. It has always been one of the chief arguments of O'Connor's detractors that her religious convictions were so extreme and unyielding, and that they so deeply infuse the bulk of her short fiction, that their very presence serves to weaken appreciably (for readers who do not share her theology) that fiction's value as literature, and renders O'Connor a less than universal writer.

Where, one wants to ask, does this leave Dante? And yet such complaints do point up a valid concern. For even the most respectful newcomer to O'Connor's stories may well find himself confused and troubled—and, in some instances, positively angered—by many of the ideas, assumptions, and images that he discovers (or thinks he does) in these stories. Even a longstanding admirer of O'Connor, for that matter, may, on returning to her short stories after a long separation, find himself in need of a period of re-adjustment to these aspects of O'Connor's fiction—most of which are related, in some way, to O'Connor's religious faith and to her sense of its proper place in her writing.

The stories take place, for instance, in a world of illness and retardation, of missing and mutilated limbs, of senile old men and suicidal children. It is a world where violence abounds: a vacationing family is slaughtered by an escaped criminal; a boy taken to a river baptism returns later and drowns himself; a farm worker is flattened by a tractor; a woman is gored to death by a bull; an old man, attacked by his small granddaughter, kills her by smashing her head against a rock; a young man mistakenly shoots his mother to death; a ten-year-old boy, eager to join his mother in heaven, hangs himself. There are few warm and selfless characters here, few loving and mutually rewarding relationships; in one story after another, a family is done in by the narcissism of one of its members, and time and again (as in many a nineteenth-century American work of fiction) city meets countryside with harrowing results.

Nowhere, moreover, does O'Connor offer a fair representation of a morally upstanding and emotionally healthy rationalist. Invariably, the self-declared rationalists in her stories and novels are selfish and unreflecting; often they are not really rationalists at all, but are running away from the faith in which they were raised. What's more, O'Connor consistently implies a connection between atheism and amorality, failing to acknowledge that people can be virtuous simply for the sake of being virtuous, and not because their eternal souls are on the line. (At the same time, of course, she realizes that people who profess Christian faith can be amoral, too.) Her incisive, elegant letters—a generous compilation of which was published in 1979 as *The Habit of Being*, and a selection of which occupies several hundred pages of the Library of America volume—at times demonstrate her contempt for her friends' value systems, even as she maintains her affection for the friends themselves; in her stories there often appears to be a similar contempt—or, one might say, condescension—in operation. "You have to be able to dominate the existence that you characterize," she insists in a letter to one of her most frequent correspondents, a woman identi-

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fied only as "A." "That is why I write about people who are more or less primitive."

Indeed, nowhere in her fiction is there a character as astute, as ethical, or as serious as O'Connor herself. On the contrary, the stories are crawling with arrogant, unreflecting mothers and their captious, pseudo-intellectual grown children, with inattentive rationalist fathers and their pathetic sons, with lazy white-trash hired men and their cliché-spouting wives. Those characters who think themselves smart and sophisticated generally learn otherwise by the end of the story. One such character is Rayber, the desperately secular schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*, who erroneously thinks he knows "exactly what [goes] on inside" the boy Tarwater's mind. Another is Hulga, an atheistic, virginal Ph.D. of thirty-two who, in "Good Country People," leads a seemingly naïve teenaged Bible salesman to a barn loft with the intention of seducing him. But Hulga turns out to be the naïf: the salesman makes off with her artificial leg, remarking indignantly that "I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going." (Clearly, not only the hired hands' wives spout clichés in these stories.) As obtuse as Hulga—though no Ph.D., she—is Mrs. Shortley, the wife of a hired hand in "The Displaced Person," whose sense of innate superiority to the black and Polish refugee farm workers around her prevents her from recognizing what the reader knows early on: that she and her husband are going to be sent packing by his employer. ("You reckon he can drive a tractor when he don't know English?" she asks about the Pole who is destined to supplant her husband; such numbing ignorance is far from rare in the world of these stories.)

The conventional dramatic reason for creating such characters is evident: the writer wishes the reader to regard them as insufferably smug, to look down upon them, and to look forward to their comeuppance. This device is not in itself objectionable. But to some readers—particularly those who are relative newcomers to the art of Flannery O'Connor—it may seem insufferably smug of her to manufacture all these insufferably smug people for them to look down upon. Yes, one can sympathize with such characters even as one is deploring their monstrous vanity. But one may long as well to share a character's surprise once in a while, to share his hurt and not experience it from a distance. At times, a newcomer to O'Connor's fiction may even have the impression that mixed in with her sympathy for her characters is a vindictive, almost sadistic feeling of it-serves-you-right. In one story after another, O'Connor's domination of her characters' existence may well make her seem as if she has forgotten her own humanity and is attempting to play God—and what could be more insufferably smug than that?

There is, in short, little compassion here—an emotion about which O'Connor herself, as it happens, has something to say. "It's considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion," she remarks in an essay entitled "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction." "Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human. The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling."

Such is the case in O'Connor's fiction: here, feeling always takes a back seat to intellectual and moral judgment. It must be said, however, that a casual reader's discomfort with the severity of the tone O'Connor typically assumes toward her characters has less to do with any real deficiencies in her fiction than with the nature of the modern temper and the norms of contemporary fiction. An attentive reader, indeed, does not take long to begin to adjust to O'Connor's vision, and to see beyond her seeming lack of concern for her characters, and the apparent smugness with which she contemplates their fates, to the essential truth of the

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matter. That truth, to put it plainly, is that O'Connor violates the unwritten rule of twentieth-century relativism, which dictates that having a religion of some sort is perfectly fine, but that actually believing in its teachings and acting upon such belief is in bad taste, is backward and undemocratic, is (for that matter) to betray the secular gods of self-discovery and self-fulfillment to which many of O'Connor's contemporaries—and our own—have solemnly dedicated their lives. One of the central concerns of O'Connor's fiction is to underline the inanity of this modern craving for self-fulfillment. She does so quite humorously in *Wise Blood,* when Sabbath Lily Hawks, the randy daughter of the evangelist Asa Hawks, tells Haze of her letter—about sex, sin, and the kingdom of heaven—to a Dear Abby-type newspaper columnist, and quotes the columnist's response: "Dear Sabbath, Light necking is acceptable, but I think your problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper prespective [*sic*] and do not let it warp you. Read some books on Ethical Culture." Likewise, O'Connor memorably pokes fun at the jargon of secular self-obsession in *The Violent Bear It Away*, when Rayber explains to Tarwater that the boy's late (and unwed) mother was not a "whore," as their recently deceased uncle maintained, but that "[s]he was just a good healthy girl, just beginning to find herself when she was struck down."

O'Connor's barbs can sting. Yet her point is manifestly not to hold these characters up to ridicule, but rather to offer each of them as an example of a flawed and troubled human soul on its way to an epiphany. If they often appear to be teeming with ignoble thoughts and emotions, it is because some of the things that cross an average human mind in the course of a day *can* be chillingly ugly, and O'Connor considers it a crucial part of her obligation as a writer to drag every unworthy thought and emotion relentlessly out into the light of day and to call it by its proper name. (Part of the writer's responsibility, she tells "A.," is "the accurate naming of the things of God.") She wants to get at the core of things, to confront her reader with the nastiest truths about human nature, and she is not afraid to do so in a blunt, disturbing, and brutally straightforward manner. There is a kind of compassion in these stories, but it is a hard compassion, the compassion not of a sentimental aunt but of a tough old priest whose belief is strong, whose priorities are in order, and who is able to stare unflinchingly into the impure hearts of men and love them in spite of their impurity.

Gratifyingly, the epiphanies into which O'Connor leads these characters are possessed of a dramatic force that does not depend in the slightest on one's belief system, even though in some cases the epiphanies draw heavily upon Christian rhetoric and imagery. The epiphanies of some of O'Connor's stories, to be sure, are relatively free of such overt religious touches. At the end of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," for instance, a snappish, supercilious young man watches his good-hearted mother suffer a stroke, and while running for help he begins to realize what he has done and what he is losing: "The tide of darkness," O'Connor writes, "seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow." End of story. In other epiphanies, however, the Christian elements are considerably more pronounced. "The Enduring Chill" presents us with another insufferable young man, a would-be intellectual named Asbury who has returned south to his mother's dairy farm after a failed attempt to become a writer in New York; weak and febrile, he thinks he is dying, and since he "ha[s] never been a sniveler after the ineffable," he seeks to create out of his own intelligence some "last significant culminating experience." But the experience doesn't come—and neither does death, for he proves to have nothing more dangerous than a

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bovine fever, which he caught by drinking unpasteurized milk as a childish act of defiance against his mother. At this news he feels numb. "The old life in him was exhausted," O'Connor writes.

> He awaited the coming of the new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacably, to descend.

One need not believe in the Holy Ghost—indeed, many who do so believe might be hard put to recognize the third member of the Trinity in this nightmarish image—in order to be moved by the exquisitely evoked spectacle of this young man forced, for the first time in his life, to confront the truth about himself and to live with it. This story, like O'Connor's other stories, asks nothing of one in the way of allegiance to any specific denomination or doctrine: it requires only that one recognize the objective existence of good and evil, the importance of human beings' responsibilities to one another, the significance of mystery, and the lamentability of our century's preoccupation with scientific knowledge at the expense of all other forms of truth. To put it a bit differently, the author of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" does not expect us to believe, with her, that people are indeed temples of the Holy Ghost; she asks only that we believe that people are temples of some sort, that we recognize their hearts and minds as fields on which the forces of right and wrong do battle, and that we see that battle as an event of utmost significance.

What a remarkable writer Flannery O'Connor is! Not only do her stories survive comparison with the best works of her generation; to read her stories alongside those of almost any of her contemporaries is to see, in those other writers, a frivolousness and superficiality of which one was hardly aware beforehand. O'Connor makes one realize how extensively the characters in those other writers' work—and one's response to them—are shaped not by real life but by other fictions. She makes words like *traditional* and *avant-garde* seem less meaningful, for whereas her prose is invariably pellucid, controlled, and unadventurous, her stories provide one with a shock of recognition that makes most fiction—avant-garde or otherwise—seem pallid, lifeless, and derivative. Acts of murder, arson, mutilation, and such—the sort of events, that is, which leave one cold when communicated in the artless, hyperbolic prose of, say, a William Burroughs—are truly overwhelming when related in the civil, serene prose of O'Connor. One responds to O'Connor's stories, indeed, as one does to an intensely charged encounter with an outlandish stranger—and yet what one finds oneself to be looking at is not a stranger but one's own reflection. Hers is, in short, an avant-garde not of style but of vision; her stories examine human life with a degree of seriousness that few postwar American writers can even approach, and much of the anger and anxiety that a reader is liable to feel on first exposure to her writing derives precisely from a fear of that seriousness, an unwillingness to match the exhausting intensity with which she carries out her inquiry into the human condition. Her stories are, in the most urgent sense, works of moral compulsion: they compel one to look critically into one's heart, to question one's most long-settled assumptions about oneself. They are not easy to pass the time with—O'Connor rightly distinguishes between herself and the type of modern writer who seeks to "lift up" a reader's heart "without cost to himself or to her"—and they are impossible to forget.

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"American apocalypse"
by Edward Hirsch

(Chicago, 1871)

It was as if God had taken a pen of fire
    Into his flaming blue hand
  And scrawled a chapter of horrors
        Across the city at night,
Burning the world in a day-and-a-half . . . .

It was as if, after 98 days of drought,
    The furious oranges and reds
  Of the Last Judgment erupted
        In a barn on DeKoven Street:
God had burnished the Gem on the prairie.

Fire seethed through the shams and shingles,
    Through the parched bodies
  Of cottages and sheds, of cow-stables,
        Corn-cribs, and pigsties,
All the tinder-dry precincts of Garden City.

The raised sidewalks were piles of kindling-
    Sticks under pine and hemlock
  Fences, the shanties were logs
        Lit by kerosene. The barns
Were giant ovens exploding in a lumbermill.

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The heavens blazed and a husky southern wind
Turned into a mass of devils
Whirling through the streets,
Advancing in a column
Of smoke and a wall of flame, a steady torrent

Of sparks and a shuddering wave of lightning
Crackling in the air.
The fire bells clanged and the
Steamers stood by helplessly.
Soon the fire swept across the sluggish river

That flared like gasoline and seemed to boil
In the 3,000 degree heat.
It burned on three sides of the water
At once, eating bridges and ships,
The huge grain elevators stacked along the banks.

First, the Tar Works exploded and then came
The Gas Works and the Armory,
The police station and the fire house,
Conley's Patch. There were
Explosions of oil, crashes of falling buildings,

And down came the Post Office and the Water Works,
The impregnable Board of Trade,
The Opera House and the Design Academy,
The sturdy Chamber of Commerce.
Down came the banks, the hotels, the churches . . .

The tornado of fire rolled toward the north
And people jammed the streets
With wagons and carts, with
Wheelbarrows of belongings.
They came tumbling out of windows and doorways,

Shrieking in all directions. There were horses
Breathing smoke in dead alleys
And dogs racing like live torches
Toward the burning water.
The noise was calamitous, torrential, deafening,

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As the world staggered to a last fiery end.
The firemen might as well
Have tried to arrest the wind itself
Since the wind and the fire
Were a single fury hurtling through the night.

The dogs of Hell bounded over the rooftops
And leaped from tree to tree.
There were no stars and no clouds,
There was nothing else
In the sky but the fierce vengeance of flames

Flattening the world into stones and ashes.
This was the Great Catastrophe
And some responded to the terror
By kneeling down in embers
And crying out for release from the prophecy:

For behold, the Lord will come in fire and
His chariots like the stormwind
To render his anger in fury
and his rebuke with flames
For by fire will the Lord execute judgment . . .

But then the judgment was stayed, the rains
Descended like manna,
Like a fresh pardon from heaven,
And the winds calmed.
The fire devils died in the arms of the lake

And the wrath abated along the open ground
At the edge of Lincoln Park.
The Great Destruction was over
For the city in ruins.
So this was the smouldering end of Time.

And this was the Lightning City after 36 hours—
A muddy black settlement
On the plains, a ditched fort
After a quick massacre.
This was the Garden of Eden reduced into cinders.

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The boom town had become an outpost again.
Soon the army was called in
To save the city from citizens
Who plundered and looted,
And stormed through the rubble in despair.

There were those who set themselves on fire,
Those who fled together
On the first trains heading east,
Those who cursed and wept
For the lost civilization on the prairie.

But there were also the unrepentant ones
Who were young and free
Of history at last. They moved
Through the ruins alone
In a jubilant new world blazing under the sun.

They stood in the cooling ashes without grief
And imagined their future
Rising out of the blue lake as
A man-made mountain range,
A city that aspired upward toward the sky.

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Music

New York music: the crisis continues

by Samuel Lipman

Some five years ago, I wrote an article for *Commentary* detailing what seemed to me then a crisis in New York musical life. In it, I discussed the general state of apathy among musicians and audiences alike, and I found this mood responsible for a long list of symptoms of institutional ill health. These included the orchestra strike and the contraction in the length of the season at Beverly Sills's City Opera, the stagnation of the repertory and the vacancy in administrative leadership at the Metropolitan Opera, and the rampant player dissatisfaction with conductor Zubin Mehta at the Philharmonic.[1]

In the intervening years much has happened. Hundreds of concerts and opera performances have been given. Artist fees—and administrative salaries—have continued to rise, as have marketing and fund-raising costs. There have been two boomlets, one affecting old music and the other new. The truly retrograde development involves the so-called authentic performance of old music—Handel and Bach through Mozart to early Beethoven—on restored original instruments or on copies thereof; the putatively progressive development involves the commissioning and performing of the romantically minimalist music of Philip Glass and John Adams. So far as the old music is concerned, the trend has influenced classically trained performers in the direction of even tighter and paler playing than had been their previous wont; so far as the new music is concerned, the effect of minimalism has been twofold: it has further separated the traditional concert-going audience from the contemporary-music audience, and it has produced a swarm of untalented compositional disciples who have found in repetition a master key to obtaining fellowships and grants.

All these developments have been heralded—in advance of their actual performance—by hundreds of encomiastic effusions in *The New York Times*, still, alas, the only daily publication in this country to take serious music seriously. The actual music-making, however, has regularly been followed in the *Times* by the withdrawal of most of its plaudits and their replacement by a heavy dose of critical sourness. What exceptions there have been to this rule of negativism have been characterized by a palpable fear that knocking local products will result in their disappearance.

Meanwhile, the institutional troubles have continued. At the City Opera, Beverly Sills has announced her departure as general director, and she has been replaced by the conductor Christopher Keene. Miss Sills's future plans remain somewhat vague, though she does talk about hosting a television talk show; in any case, she has promised to remain involved with the City Opera in some capacity. Her successor, Mr. Keene, has not been particularly successful

1 "Musical New York in Decline," *Commentary*, October 1983.

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in his many conducting assignments with the company, and it is hard to see in him the necessary spark of imagination that marks every successful ruler of an opera house.

By all accounts, the reign of Miss Sills has been distinguished solely by the kind of massive fund-raising necessary these days to keep an opera company going. The day-to-day level of City Opera performances, despite occasional excellent portrayals of individual roles, has failed to excite the current interest of opera lovers or to provide them with the kind of memories that build a tradition of subscriber loyalty. Not only can the City Opera not compete with the neighboring Metropolitan Opera in casting internationally active singers and in the provision of sumptuous and necessarily expensive productions, but the house in which it plays—the New York State Theater—remains vastly too large, and somehow too chilling, for the kind of intimacy that most operas need for the powerful communication of their dramatic passions, and that the company's young singers need to make possible the illusion of vocal size and richness that alone can make opera believable.[2]

Long, long ago, what the City Opera failed to provide in finish it more than made up for in the interest of its repertory. A canny combination of familiar and new (or at least unfamiliar) at cheap ticket prices marked the company from its founding in 1944, which meant it was able both to please new audiences for opera and to showcase the best in twentieth-century works. But in the 1960s, the supply of new operas capable of entering the repertory just about dried up; and audience receptivity to new or unfamiliar works seemed to dry up as well.

To its credit, the City Opera in the past few years has attempted to do new works. Among these have been Philip Glass's *Akhnaten*, Dominick Argento's *Casanova*, Anthony Davis's *X*, Oliver Knussen's *Where the Wild Things Are*, and, most recently, Jay Reise's *Rasputin*. Of these, *Akhnaten*—or at least that part of it that I managed to sit through—was to my ears a great bore in Glass's all too well-known manner.[3] *Casanova*, a setting of the lover's ups and downs, was well received by what is left of the traditional opera-going public at the City Opera—in spite of, or perhaps because of, its elements of musical pastiche.[4] *X*, a polemical treatment of the life and death of Malcolm X, was musically thin and abrasive in its ideological thrust, although it did manage the not inconsiderable feat of enticing a sizable black audience into the New York State Theater. *Where the Wild Things Are*, after the 1963 story by Maurice Sendak, treated of a small boy's night dream of glory in a dramatically low-key and compositionally uninspired fashion.

The most recent of the City Opera's efforts to find something new was *Rasputin*. This opera, Jay Reise's first, brought both good news and bad news. The good news was that the story of the mad monk, the rotten-ripe atmosphere at the Tsarist Court in the last days of the Romanovs, the catastrophe of World War I, and Lenin's brutal lust for power, taken together, make one hell of a subject for an opera; the bad news was that Mr. Reise proved yet again that writing notes in a medley of styles—in his case, ranging from Mussorgsky to Tchaikowsky, Wagner, Puccini, and the Second Viennese School—is no substitute for a composer's own musical personality.

And so despite the City Opera's efforts under Beverly Sills, the fundamental prob-

2 A sad demonstration of the influence of the barnlike atmosphere of the New York State Theater on what was most likely a splendid City Opera effort took place just this past October, when Douglas Moore's charming and deeply affecting 1956 work, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, seemed dwarfed in the house even when witnessed from an excellent seat in the orchestra.

3 For a discussion of *Akhnaten*, and of the Glass phenomenon as a whole, see my article "*Einstein*'s Long March to Brooklyn" in *The New Criterion*, February 1985.

4 My consideration of *Casanova* may be found in "*Casanova* at the City Opera" in *The New Criterion*, January 1986.

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lem of the company's artistic identity remains what it was at the time she assumed the general directorship in 1979. With Mr. Keene at the helm, there will inevitably be suggestions for novel approaches. One such suggestion came in an October *New York Times* interview with Robert W. Wilson, the chairman of the City Opera board. Mr. Wilson thinks the City Opera has "the bright young American singers, but we are not getting the bright young directors . . . . We are living in a visual age and the challenge is to have something that is visually communicative but does not detract from the music." Unfortunately for Mr. Wilson's idea of beefing up the visuals as a means of saving the City Opera, each of the new operas I mentioned above as musically uninteresting was distinguished by powerful and imaginative stage productions which failed to make up for the composer's lacks.

Though Mr. Wilson professes to be an admirer of Philip Glass and John Adams, whose *Nixon in China* he would like the City Opera to put on, his plan for the company involves doing fewer operas in longer runs:

> If we could do more performances and still sell as many seats, or more, then we could have more rehearsal per opera without increasing the total amount of rehearsal time . . . . Our average now is something below eighty percent of capacity, and that's just about ten percent too low to tolerate. I have almost a moral problem with tolerating it. I think that ticket sales should bear at least half the cost of an evening, and the people who attend operatic performances are not appropriate objects of charity.

Mr. Wilson's implication is clear: the proper function of an opera company is to please its paying customers, and it can only do so by finding out what is popular, and doing a lot of it. According to this bottom-line approach, there is no notion that the primary duty of an artistic institution—even an opera company—is the preservation and extension of art, which is the sole reason for the institution's existence and philanthropic status. The implication for the future of the New York City Opera is plain, too: what is important is not opera's future, or even its past, but rather its balance sheet.

A few hundred feet across Lincoln Center Plaza, the vastly richer and more solidly rooted Metropolitan Opera has also just lost a leader. Bruce Crawford, the advertising executive who assumed the post of general manager in 1986, resigned at the beginning of November to take a position as chief executive officer of a New York-based advertising firm. Under his administration, the Met was able to get a grip on spiraling production costs and raise the percentage of its house sold at the box office from eighty-three to ninety percent—perhaps not coincidentally the number which so enchants Mr. Wilson at the City Opera.

This year, too, the Met is finally managing to get the four operas of Richard Wagner's *Ring—Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*—on the stage in one season, in the proper order, and in the same week of performances. This feat, frequently managed by European opera houses, has been beyond the Met's reach since the spring of 1976. The new *Ring*, in a relatively realistic production by Otto Schenk, has won reasonably enthusiastic press notices. But the praise has been inspired, it would seem, rather more by gratitude for one's being able once again to see and hear these marvelous works than by the quality of their performance.[5]

Mr. Crawford is leaving at a time when rumors continue to swirl about the future of conductor James Levine, the Met's artistic director now for some years. It is perhaps not an extravagant compliment to agree with the received opinion that Mr. Levine is the strongest conductor currently active at the Met; his penchant for learning great works by conducting them for the first time in his

5 For my discussion of the Met's 1986 *Die Walküre*, the first of the four operas to be mounted in the new Schenk production, see "The Met's Failed *Walküre*" in *The New Criterion*, November 1986.

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own opera house seems on the whole well tolerated by today's mostly complaisant music critics, who regularly point with pride to how well, after all, he settles into the scores as he does them night after night. For me, this greatly gifted musician's conducting is increasingly unsatisfactory and even unacceptable. He has replaced his former endearing, if immature, aggressiveness with a boring and stodgy pseudo-profundity.

Singing at the Met seems a gathering problem as well. At the end of November, Donal Henahan, the curmudgeonly music critic of *The New York Times*, stirred from his lair to attack the company, especially its artistic administrator, Jonathan Friend, who is, Henahan wrote, "[p]ossibly beyond his depth . . . [demonstrating] little gift for recognizing good new opera voices or placing established artists in congenial roles . . . . [T]he dismay [over casting] regularly extends to first-night casts and to first performances of new productions."

For me, at least, these problems of musical direction and vocalism are demonstrated in the just-released Metropolitan Opera compact disc recording of *Die Walküre*.[6] Of the six major roles in this opera—Brünnhilde (Hildegard Behrens), Sieglinde (Jessye Norman), Fricka (Christa Ludwig), Siegmund (Gary Lakes), Wotan (James Morris), and Hunding (Kurt Moll)—none seems adequately portrayed in voice and character. The Brünnhilde, under-equipped for one of the most demanding roles in the operatic literature, is under continuous and plainly audible vocal pressure; the Sieglinde, possessed of an unbounded voice, substitutes generalized expressiveness for particularized passion; the Fricka is tremulously sung by a once great singer whose splendid portrayal of the role may be heard on the Solti *Ring* recorded in the late 1950s and the 1960s[7]; the Siegmund, in addition to laboring mightily to get the notes out, lacks vocal color and dramatic personality; the Wotan sounds thin and callow, totally lacking in the necessary fatherly qualities of warmth and worry; the Hunding lacks both the focused dark bass once to be heard from German singers and the quality of horrifying malice so central to the role. And the conducting is par for Mr. Levine's current course: full of stops and starts, gestures without meaning, and shapes without coherent structure.

No observer of the opera scene today needs to be told that there is a shortage of historically great singers. It often goes unremarked, however, that second-rank artists—those below the highest level of fame and audience appeal—lack clear, well-produced voices and stage personalities that are alive with clearly communicated idiomatic conceptions of the requisite styles, if not also with personal magnetism. Sadly, the models for the development of this authenticity seem not to exist even in the national homes of the great operas of the repertory. What is going on in opera houses all over the world may charitably be called internalization; less charitably, it may be described as a falling out of touch with the long-dead composers of masterpieces and with the traditions and daily life of the societies out of which our great music has come.

This problem bears with particular force on the Metropolitan Opera, so far from the world which created opera and so close to the corporate balance sheet. Much is made of the Met's present reliance on American singers, including several with large international careers, but the fact remains that European opera performance is for Americans an acquired ability, an ability founded on the lifelong effort to cultivate an authentic style. With no European models to inspire the Met, it is hardly surprising that its performances of works heard many times over many years should seem increasingly pallid and homogenized.

One solution, of course, is an increased attention to the repertory. It is precisely in

6 Deutsche Grammophon 423 398-2 (four compact discs).

7 A technological marvel for its time, and probably for ours as well, is now available on fifteen compact disks, as London 414100-2.

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this area that the Met's problems have gone unattended for so long. It has been years since the Met has done an American opera, with the single exception of a recent production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, a work hardly suited either to the plenitude of the Met's resources or to the lushness of its ambience. The contemporary works the Met has chosen to do in recent years—like *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* of Berg and *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd* of Britten—are often estimable in their own right, but they have all seemed to belong to the world of European rather than American modernism. Even so, the Met has steadfastly refused to put on Arnold Schoenberg's monumental *Moses und Aron*, a classic of the modern operatic stage and an important work about the tormented twentieth-century relation between prophetic virtue and political leadership.

Now the Met seems intent on breaking with its policy of concentrating entirely on Europe. It has commissioned three new works, the first traditional and the other two belonging to what passes these days for minimalism. The traditional opera, *A Figaro for Antonia*, based on Beaumarchais's *L'Autre Tartufe, ou la Mère Coupable* (1792), is to be written by the musically very approachable John Corigliano, with a libretto by William Hoffman. Of the two minimalist operas, one (to be performed in a special season in Brooklyn, not at the Metropolitan Opera House) will be based on the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*, and is to be written by John Adams and Alice Goodman, the composer/librettist team of *Nixon in China*; the second, called *The Voyage*, will be a celebration of Columbus's discovery of America and is to be written by the ubiquitous Philip Glass with a libretto by David Henry Hwang, the author of the current Broadway sensation *M. Butterfly*. No opera can be judged unheard, and one wishes the Met well in these commissions. It is hardly to prejudge their success or failure to remark that the odds on Mr. Crawford's successor enjoying a quiet introduction to his work as general manager seem very low indeed.

Then there is the plight of the New York Philharmonic, the grandfather of American orchestras and the one with the proudest record of service to symphonic music in general and to American symphonic music in particular. It is no secret that the Philharmonic has been going through a difficult period with Zubin Mehta, who was chosen as music director with high hopes that he would bring to the orchestra the kind of popular artistic and financial success so common during the tenure of Leonard Bernstein (1958-69) and so lacking during that of Pierre Boulez (1970-77). From Mehta's arrival on the New York scene in 1978 to the present time he has not been able to galvanize either orchestra or audience; reviewers, tired of repeating their sour judgments, have tended to ignore his concerts or, at best, to give them short shrift.

Needless to say, Mehta's tenure has had a devastating effect on New York's musical life. The Philharmonic is no longer the nerve center of local concert activity; Philharmonic broadcasts increasingly serve a documentary rather than an inspirational purpose; Philharmonic concerts, at least those conducted by Mehta, don't thrill; Philharmonic programs are now rarely a subject for discussion among music lovers or musicians. Even criticism of the orchestra and its conductor in the press and among friends has begun to seem tired and halfhearted, as if all that needed to be said about the Philharmonic's lack of excitement and musical centrality—about the coarsening of its performance standards under Mehta—has been said already, often and sufficiently.

Of course, the Philharmonic management has taken great pains to make clear that Mr. Mehta is leaving of his own volition, and that a new contract has always been his for the asking. However that may be, the Philharmonic now has an opportunity to choose its future path. That choice will not be easy, for just as there is a worldwide shortage of first-rank, charismatic opera singers—and, for that matter, instrumentalists—there are few conductors around who can quicken the pulse of musicians or audiences. Those who

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can, like Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, and Sir Georg Solti, are in their seventies or older. There really aren't many first-rank conductors today. Not very many, that is, when compared to a half century ago, when the list of those who would today be stars included Sir Thomas Beecham, Leo Blech, Artur Bodanzky, Adrian Boult, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Robert Heger, Erich Kleiber, Otto Klemperer, Hans Knappertsbusch, Serge Koussevitzky, Clemens Krauss, Willem Mengelberg, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Pierre Monteux, Charles Munch, Fritz Reiner, Artur Rodzinski, Malcolm Sargent, Tullio Serafin, Leopold Stokowski, George Szell, Arturo Toscanini, and Bruno Walter.

In the difficult search for a successor to Mehta, there are also problems beyond art. The expansion in numbers of orchestras and the lengthening of seasons have combined to stretch the available supply of podium stars even thinner. Despite the vast popular success of Leonard Bernstein (still, in his eighth decade, our musical hope) and the thus far entrenched position of James Levine at the Met, American conductors are still rarely chosen as music directors of our major orchestras, no matter how artistically qualified they may be. As a result of this lingering colonial mentality, the Europeans who are invited here combine their American duties with one or more positions abroad: for our major orchestras, it seems, half a European conductor is better than none.

As difficult as the choice facing the Philharmonic is, there is no escaping it. Perhaps it can best be put in the form of a long question: Does the Philharmonic exist to entertain the largest possible audiences in the largest number of concerts, or does the orchestra exist to give a coherent picture of a great artist's musical vision, and in the process shape the future of what is still to be called classical music?

It will doubtless be argued that if a great orchestra does not entertain its audience, it will die. But is that really so? Mr. Mehta, it can hardly be denied, is an entertainer, and it is as an entertainer that he is now widely seen to have failed at Lincoln Center. His predecessor, Pierre Boulez, was an artist who attempted to shape New York musical taste, and it was as a shaper of taste that he failed. But can anyone deny that the musical interest in the Philharmonic—and the honorable esteem in which it was held—was greater when Mr. Boulez returned to France than it is now when Mr. Mehta leaves for parts unknown?

Let me answer my own question (one of the few perquisites a critic enjoys). The mission of an orchestra is an *artistic*, not an entertainment, task. The role of a music director is to tell the world what music should be heard, and how it should be heard. A great conductor—like Hans von Bülow, Gustav Mahler, or Artur Nikisch, to take three conductors who were, so to speak, present at the creation—is able through his work on the podium to form an artistic milieu. Such a task can be accomplished by the imprinting of a musical personality on the times—not, I might add, simply on *The New York Times*. A great conductor does not reflect, he *leads*.

It is in relation to this attribute of leading rather than reflecting that I found the contents of a recent Philharmonic concert broadcast so disturbing. The program featured two Bernstein works, the *Chichester Psalms* and the Symphony no. 3 (*Kaddish*), conducted in the current season by Zubin Mehta in honor of the composer's recent birthday. These works—not, it seems to me, Bernstein's best—received routine performances. More troubling than the music was the intermission interview conducted with David Del Tredici, the Philharmonic's recently appointed composer-in-residence.

Curiously, a composer-in-residence is asked to do more than just write some music for the orchestra to play, and to learn from the experience. He is also expected (in the case of Mr. Del Tredici, with the help of an assistant) to evaluate, for the benefit of the music director, the myriad new compositions now being written with subsidies from numerous public and private grant programs. It is obvious that in this process the

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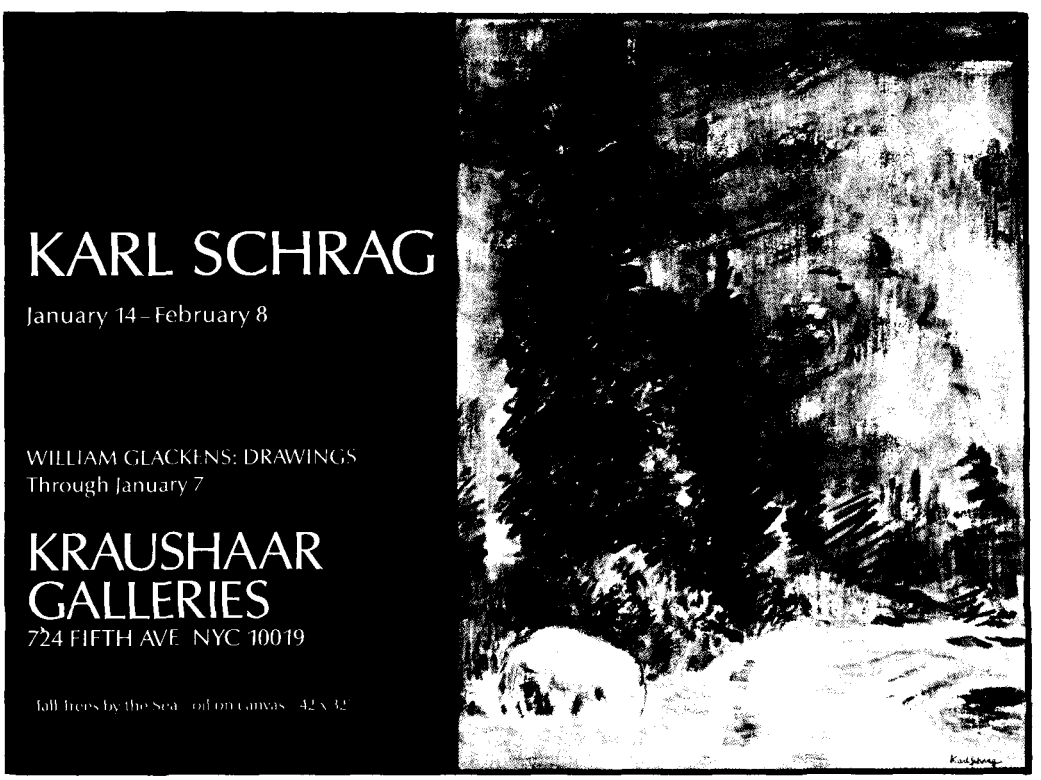
music director is quite content to abdicate his own role as judge of what he is to play, and, by playing, to urge upon his audience. The interview made clear that, in his selection process, Mr. Del Tredici was required not to choose new music from a committed and personal point of view:

> *Interviewer*: Are there any particular stylistic fingerprints you're looking for, or is it a general exciting score that attracts your attention?
> *Mr. Del Tredici*: Well, I remember Zubin saying to me, after my appointment, he said, "Now, I want you to see every kind of diverse style. I want you to choose in all styles. Can you do that, or will you just choose music like your own?" And as I said to him, I certainly hope that I will choose from a diversity of styles. I mean, I've written in very many styles myself, and I'm interested. And in New York there's such a variety of music being written, it's really dizzying, and the Philharmonic programs will and should reflect all of that diversity.

This, I submit, is not the way for an artist to decide what art will be presented to the public. The process described above is not the making of musical decisions, it is the avoiding of them. The decision about who will next lead the Philharmonic lies, of course, with the board of the Philharmonic. Such tasks always properly fall to those who are ultimately responsible for the fate of every great artistic institution. The candidates (especially the Americans) for the Philharmonic or any other music directorship do not necessarily jump off the pages of the world's newspapers, nor do they jump off the balance sheets of the world's great recording and electronic media conglomerates. The right conductor for the Philharmonic need not be a superstar. The right conductor must be someone who is willing to live or die by the service he provides to music. The Philharmonic has been in the past, and can be now, a uniquely great orchestra. Let the search for its leader begin.



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Art

The hidden legacy of Anne Ryan

by Deborah Solomon

Anne Ryan was never a household name, but then she never intended to be. By the time of her death in 1954, she was greatly esteemed for her collages, which she'd started making only six years earlier, after a long and somewhat disappointing career as a poet, novelist, painter, and printmaker. Ryan's collages are often no larger than a manuscript page, and some are so small they could fit in a shirt pocket. Though they don't have a great deal in common with the large-scale strivings of Abstract Expressionism, that didn't keep Ryan from winning a following in vanguard circles during her lifetime. Betty Parsons gave her several shows, discerning critics reviewed them favorably, and Ryan quickly established herself as a serious, highly individual figure whose work could be disarmingly beautiful.

These days, one doesn't hear too much about Ryan. She's not mentioned in any of the numerous so-called survey books on American art, and a monograph has yet to be written on her. Exhibitions of her work can be seen periodically at the Washburn Gallery in New York, but the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, which own some of her finest collages, haven't shown them for years. The obscurity into which Ryan has fallen in the thirty-five years since her death doesn't come as a great surprise. As isolated as she was from the major artistic developments of her age, she's light years away from the developments of our own age. The small scale of her work, the modesty of her ambitions, the restraint with which she expressed herself, and even the excellence of her craftsmanship have all served, to varying degrees, to militate against a wider appreciation of her talents at a time when the opposite of virtually everything she stood for characterizes the work of our most celebrated artists.

All of this helps to explain why "Anne Ryan: Prints and Collages," which can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through January 29, should be regarded as a welcome event. It's not a show likely to draw crowds, and you practically need a compass to find it within the museum's palatial sprawl. The exhibition occupies just one gallery, and brings together nineteen collages, a handful of prints, and one stray canvas. Most of these works were donated to the museum by the artist's daughter, and this is the first time they've been pulled out of storage. While one wishes the prints had been left behind—they're not in the same league as the collages—the exhibition as a whole establishes Ryan as one of the truly memorable figures of the Fifties. And it helps us understand why she's been overlooked. Her collages date to the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, but they don't try to topple tradition or plumb the tenebrous depths of the self. They're meticulous, controlled, carefully nuanced works in which feeling is revealed only reluctantly. Ryan saw her work as a refuge from emotionality, and she never deviated from this classical approach.

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Ryan first turned to collage after seeing a Kurt Schwitters show in 1948, and her earliest collages reveal his direct and undisguised influence. Diligently, she arranged bits of paper and printed debris into rigorous geometries, while striving for Schwitters's worldliness as well. A collage identified as *Number 6* (Ryan preferred numbers to titles) brings together a pocketful of torn-up scraps and the souvenirs of a night on the town—cellophane from a cigarette pack, the words "St. Moritz" scissored from a matchbook, a clump of thread (was it dangling from her hem?). It's an elegant, gently witty work, and Ryan might have made more like it, but she soon lost interest in the type of collage whose meaning resides in amusing juxtapositions. In the late Teens, when Schwitters started incorporating bus tickets and postage stamps into abstract compositions, the gesture was partly a personal lament and partly a Dadaist joke. Ryan, by contrast, believed too sincerely in the ideal of art to allow herself any irony. A few weeks after she made her first collages, she stopped scavenging around for printed rubbish and headed away from the gritty browns and tans of Schwitters into purer, more tranquil territory.

It wasn't long before she had achieved a wholly distinctive style. Around 1950, Ryan began making austere, no-nonsense abstractions in which little rectangles of paper and fabric are fitted together along horizontal and vertical lines. They recall the spatial logic of early Cubism, and the oval format they sometimes occupy echoes the work of Picasso and Braque from 1912. But Ryan wasn't really a direct heir of Cubism so much as a cousin once removed: she absorbed the lessons of the French masters through the work of Hans Hofmann, whom she befriended in the Forties, when he was running an art school on West Eighth Street. Like Hofmann, Ryan was mainly interested in the expression of equilibrated relationships, the balancing of color and shapes. Her style was infinitely more subdued than his. She had no use for Hofmann's ruler-perfect rectangles, or his saturated blocks of color, preferring forms that were slightly irregular, and delicate hues. She might use as many as eight different blues in a single collage, and some of her most memorable works are done entirely in whites and off-whites. Ryan was fascinated by Hofmann's ideas on how rectangles of color can push and pull one another around, but she was also wary of that sort of bossy behavior. Her forms aren't locked in a tug of war so much as in an erudite exchange.

Despite the constraints Ryan imposed on herself—the diminutive size, the ethereal colors, the scrupulously geometric forms—she did allow herself one indulgence. She went all out in her choice of materials. Her palette included Chinese tea papers, handmade Howell papers, bits of dishcloth, burlap, taffeta, and tulle—a whole lexicon of textures. Ryan's forms sometimes carry connotative overtones. A swatch of fabric unraveling at the edges brings to mind tattered clothing, the romance of the bohemian life. Scraps of gauze, so thin and flimsy, seem sadly inadequate for bandaging wounds. Ragged note paper is comparably robust, capable of conveying the weightiest thoughts. Associations such as these are inevitable, but Ryan doesn't want us to have too many of them. She's far more interested in directing our attention toward formal relations, the opulent language of texture and hue and shape. Beneath her miniature surfaces lies a sensuality that at times seems almost uncontrollable.

Ryan didn't date most of her collages, which of course makes it difficult to get a clear sense of her creative development. Development? It may seem unlikely that a collagist who created her entire oeuvre in the course of six years experienced many major growth spurts, but Ryan's work did indeed evolve over time. The exhibition at the Metropolitan is installed in clusters of two or three works, each suggesting a different chapter. First we encounter the "early" Ryan, the studious apprentice to Schwitters, then quickly pass to the mature

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Ryan, the high-minded classicist who can invest fabric throwaways with exquisite lucidity and calm. But she didn't stop there. At some inexact date, Ryan became restless with her tidy accumulations of squares and rectangles. Under the influence of the Abstract Expressionists, she pried her forms loose from the spine of Cubism and began to strive for the spontaneity she admired in the work of her contemporaries.

There are several collages in the Metropolitan show in which Ryan adopts an "all-over" format, evenly dispersing tiny scraps of color across her diminutive surface. Chaos is hinted at, but never breaks loose; the repetition of colors and shapes assures us that order will prevail. A work identified as *Number 319* shows Ryan at her liveliest, scattering bits of black and tissue-thin pink into dense, arresting designs. Shiny gold foil peeks out from crevices, heightening the decorative glow. The work has a messy, windblown charm, but it isn't quite as captivating as Ryan's more controlled collages, particularly the oval ones, where regimented horizontals and verticals ensnare tiny bits of luxuriant fabric like solder around jewels.

For a long time, Anne Ryan has been treated as an idiosyncratic figure, an artist cut off from the major innovations of the Fifties. Yet all artists are to some degree shaped by the art of their time, and Ryan was no exception. There is something of Ad Reinhardt in her reverence for the rectangle, and something of Rothko in the soft luminosity of her colors. There are intimations of Bradley Walker Tomlin in the tight, constrained rhythms of her "all-over" compositions. Each of these painters exhibited at the Parsons Gallery in the years when Ryan was showing there, and clearly she was sympathetic to their work. It seems a shame that no one has ever examined Ryan's relationship to the Abstract Expressionists; she responded with speed and flair to the most radical developments of her time. On the other hand, one doesn't want to make too much of her connection to Abstract Expressionism or encourage some over-eager academic to "re-discover" her as a minor master of that school. Her basic allegiance was to European abstraction as opposed to its American variations.

The exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, which was organized by assistant curator Lisa M. Messinger, contributes virtually nothing to our understanding of Ryan's place in the flow of art history. We're not provided with an accompanying catalogue, or even a brochure, or background information of any sort other than an obligatory note stamped on a wall. The show is an exceedingly modest affair, and in a way it's a relief to know that modest undertakings are still possible at the Met; not every exhibition needs to be commemorated with a ten-pound catalogue written by a clutch of world-class scholars. Yet surely there are options available to curators other than the mega-show or the non-show, which the Ryan show essentially is. Without the armature of scholarship, we gain no more from seeing the works than we would in a commercial gallery. Ryan deserves better than this. It's not enough simply to toss her collages up on the wall and expect them to argue their own case in the court of art history. That's what curators are for.

While the Met hasn't expended much energy or imagination on the Ryan show, one doesn't want to give the impression that the Met has done nothing at all. The Met has done quite a bit. For one, it's erected a ridiculous pink wall in the middle of the gallery. The wall is actually the back of a showcase containing a few of Ryan's prints; the decision to dress it up in a coat of pink strikes one as most misguided. To be sure, pink was a color Ryan liked, but she also liked tan and beige and blue, and any of those colors could have sufficed to add some warmth to the room without turning it into a shrine to femininity.

More problematic is the uneven quality of the works on display. Ryan's prints and paintings don't measure up to her collages, and their presence here lends the show an aura of dilettantism. The pink wall only

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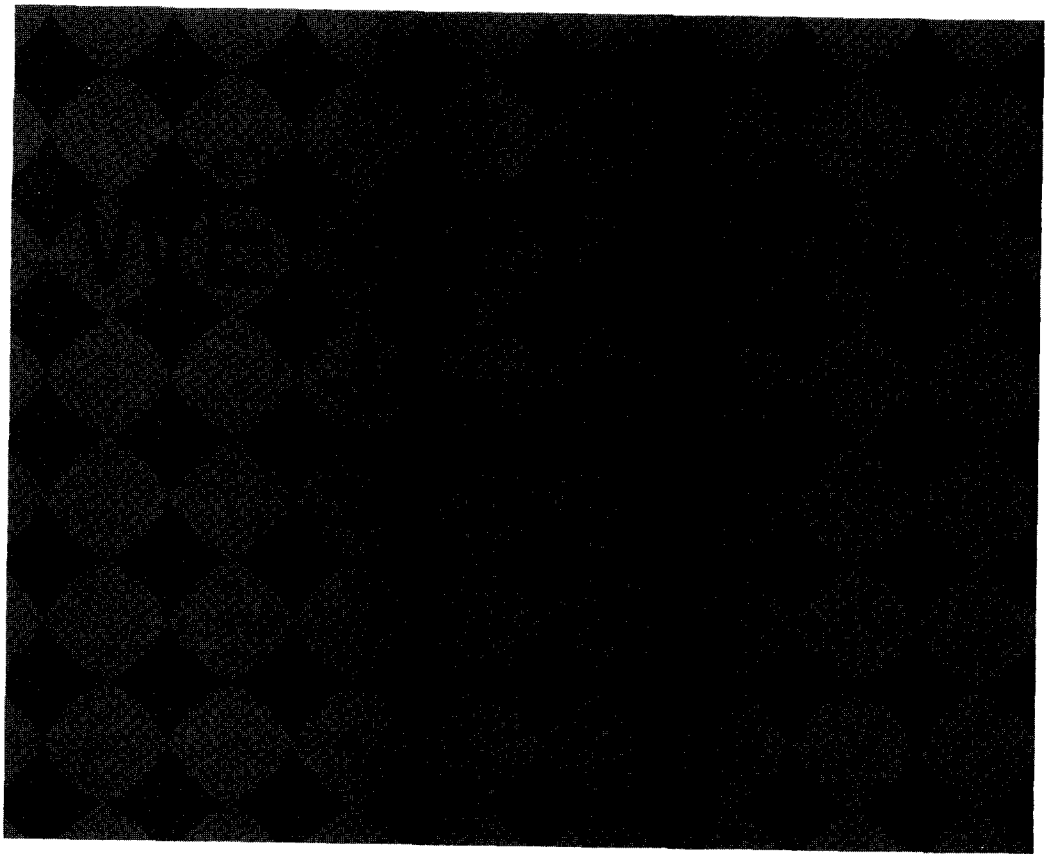

makes it worse; it's almost as if we're supposed to see Ryan as a nice, genteel, tea-drinking type who dabbled in this and that. It's impossible to fathom what twist of logic prompted the Met to pull out every Ryan it owns and put them all on public view, regardless of their artistic merits. Could any artist hope to look good with that sort of unedited exposure? One gets the sense that the museum was simply emptying out its storage racks, anxiously looking for something—anything—that could help fill space in its notoriously vast Lila Acheson Wallace Wing.

The exhibition at the Metropolitan seems less designed to honor Ryan than to drag her to the ground, and it's to her immense credit that she emerges from it a little bit bruised, but firmly on her feet. She comes across as an artist whose work you want to see more of, someone you want to know more about. At the moment, there's very little information available on her work or life. In 1974, the Brooklyn Museum mounted a show of Ryan's collages, and the catalogue by Sarah Faunce remains the most definitive discussion of her career—even though the text is just five pages. Beyond that, information on Ryan consists of little more than the usual miscellany of printed material surrounding an artist's life: gallery brochures, assorted reviews, an obituary from *The New York Times* (it ran an impressive seven paragraphs long).

Ryan's life story is one of unending disappointment and misfortunes, very little of which was revealed in her work. She was born in 1889 in Hoboken, New Jersey, the daughter of a prosperous Irish-Catholic banker. By the time she was fourteen, both her parents had died—her mother of suicide—and Ryan and her three younger brothers were living with a widowed grandmother. Ryan attended college at the Academy of St. Elizabeth but dropped out during her junior year to marry a law student by the name of William McFadden. The couple bought a house in Newark, and within a few years Ryan had given birth to three children and was balancing the

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demands of family life with a fledgling career as a poet and writer. But her marriage didn't last very long; in 1923, she broke it off.

Two years later, Ryan published a volume of poetry, *Lost Hills* (New Door Press). The book consists mostly of sonnets that adhere to a Shakespearean rhyme scheme. It seems fitting that Ryan would have been drawn to this form, given her instinct, as revealed in her collages, for tight, precise construction. And like her collages, Ryan's sonnets are emotionally constrained; they don't announce themselves loudly. Virtually all of her poems are narrated by the same person, a woman preoccupied by her separateness from the outside world. There are frequent references to windows, masks, and locked gates, the barriers that keep "each self within its wall." There are allusions to mazes, tangled paths, endless roads, to distances that can't be spanned. Ryan's poetry isn't much fun to read, and her standoffishness can be tiresome. But her poetry does make you grateful for the larger and larger revelations of feeling that Ryan would discover when she turned to collage two decades later.

In 1934, after spending a few years in Mallorca, Ryan settled in Greenwich Village, renting an apartment on West Fourth Street. She arrived in the city at a time when painters like Pollock and de Kooning were anonymous young men with twenty-three-dollar-a-week jobs on the Federal Art Project. Ryan was a good deal older than they, and perhaps a little bit weary, for by now she was a middle-aged divorcée who had written a novel that no one would publish (its title was *Raquel*) and had resigned herself to a mediocre career as a poet. But she didn't feel defeated. In 1938, she started painting, producing willfully primitive still lifes and figure studies. She received some encouragement from her friends Tony Smith and Hans Hofmann, the latter of whom reportedly advised her to continue working on her own rather than enrolling at his school. "You might turn out better than the lot of us," Hofmann told her. It's a measure of Ryan's modesty that she took the comment as a compliment.

If Ryan was a latecomer to art, she quickly found herself in the company of the artistic vanguard. In 1941, she joined Atelier 17, the fabled printmaking workshop run by Stanley William Hayter. There she met Max Ernst, Masson, and other stars of the Parisian art scene and sat and made engravings beside the future Abstract Expressionists. Ryan didn't benefit a great deal from Hayter's lessons in linear automatism, and perhaps his emphasis on speed, flux, and freedom ran against her instincts; the five engravings included in the Metropolitan show are simply too stiff to hold our interest. Ryan also made some woodblock prints, and with far more successful results. Her *Frightened Bird* of 1946 is a marvelous quasi-Cubist composition in which large chunks of pink, green, and aqua glow like cut glass against black paper, hinting at her imminent leap into collage.

A major turning point in Ryan's life came in February 1948, when the Rose Fried Gallery put on the first show of Schwitters's collages ever held in this country. Schwitters died the month before it opened, so it turned out to be a memorial exhibition. Legend has it that Ryan saw the show and headed straight home to make her first collage. It's not hard to understand her immediate identification with Schwitters, for in his collages she recognized the visual equivalent of her sonnets—discrete images packed together in an extremely compressed space. Over the next six years, she worked with the speed and sureness of one who has finally found her true medium, producing more than four hundred collages.

In January 1954, three months before a stroke abruptly ended her life, Ryan published a short story, "She Was Divorced," in the literary journal *Folder*. The story has only one character, an aging divorcée named Margaret who has just decided to sublet her house and travel abroad to escape the memory of her

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marriage to an unfaithful attorney. Part of the story takes place in Margaret's living room, as she clears away her belongings: "The packing and storing of her fragile treasures completely filled her days . . . . It was like tearing up in little pieces the whole order of the rooms. What furniture she left looked different, spread out, worn and even tawdry and the pleasant fullness of life was gone and all the familiar comfort. The usual scene was over and the more she ripped up and threw out, the more stale she felt; deadened. Perhaps she could begin again somewhere but what real new life comes at 58? No, there is only descent and more and more silence."

What new life comes at fifty-eight? In the case of Anne Ryan, a burst of new life, for it was, of course, when she was fifty-eight years old that she made her first collage. The protagonist in her story feels "deadened" as she moves about the room ripping up reminders of the past, and perhaps Ryan, too, sometimes sat at the worktable in her studio feeling a twinge of loss as she tore fine papers into scraps. Ryan's collages are not like anyone else's. They're not like Lee Krasner's, in which exploding shards of color are caught in midair, and they have none of the razzle-dazzle of Matisse's great cutouts. Nor are they like Motherwell's collages, in which Gauloise cigarette wrappings and labels from fancy wines bespeak a fluency with French elegance. Ryan can't afford that sort of extravagance. Her tiny little scraps convey a sense of thrift, the carefulness of a petite bourgeoise spending her last gold coins. She seems to be saying, "This is everything I have. Is it enough?"

Ryan's collages are deeply felt, deeply beautiful works and they deserve a wider audience. Which is why the show at the Metropolitan must finally be regarded as a disappointment; it simply doesn't do her justice. When I visited the museum to see the show, I stopped off at the information desk to ask what gallery it was in. The woman at the desk looked baffled. Anne Ryan? Who? There was no such show at the Met, she insisted, then quickly turned away to tend a throng of visitors eager to learn how to get tickets for the Degas show. I headed off to the twentieth-century wing, wandering through a succession of galleries filled with the art of the Eighties, much of it as big and clumsy as a rhinoceros. The biologist Edward O. Wilson once observed that if it weren't for size, the rhinoceros would be of no interest and we'd all be enchanted by the ant.

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International episode: the 1988 Carnegie International

by Jed Perl

The international art caravan unpacked its tents in Pittsburgh for a couple of days last November. Jet-lagged and bleary-eyed curators, dealers, artists, collectors, and critics from the United States and Europe toured the 1988 Carnegie International, a gathering of one hundred works by thirty-nine artists, which was presented in a stately progression of galleries at the Carnegie Museum of Art.[1] Afterward, everybody took a seat alongside Pittsburgh society in the gold and marble splendor of the foyer of the Carnegie Music Hall for a black-tie dinner. Six hundred and fifty people were at dinner, including more than half of the artists in the show. Wolfgang Laib was among a number of artists who dissented from formal dress. A student of Eastern religions who sports a monkishly shorn head, Laib appeared in a waist-length jacket of what looked like matted orange terry cloth. Julian Schnabel, outfitted in a big splendid waistcoat and cravat—and with his young daughter in tow—had a seat in the balcony, a balcony out of some Tiepolo fantasy of a Venetian costume ball. During dessert there was a roll call of the participating artists, and those seated up in the balcony definitely had a theatrical advantage when it came their turn to take a bow. After that, it was time for the awarding of the Carnegie Prize, which went to Rebecca Horn, a forty-four-year-old German conceptual artist whose entry, an installation called *The Hydra-Forest/performing: Oscar Wilde*, memorialized the Anglo-Irish author with some ear-splitting sound effects and fairly dangerous-looking bursts of spark. By the time Horn took the podium to accept—she's the first woman to win the prize since 1899, when it went to the American portrait painter Cecilia Beaux—the hour was late, people were tired and eager to go back to their homes or hotel rooms. After midnight, impromptu parties sprouted in some of the downtown hotels.

The day leading up the dinner didn't seem to have put people in an especially upbeat mood, except perhaps for the curators and staff of the Carnegie Museum, who were at the end of a long process, and, of course, the artists whose work was hanging in the show. While the jury was closeted in the afternoon, picking a prizewinner, an important dealer went through the galleries grumbling to anyone who would listen about how poorly her artist's work was being displayed. She got the work moved before nightfall. Many kinds of power were being wielded, including the power of language. At a press luncheon, the curator of the exhibition, John Caldwell, emphasized the predominance of German artists in the show (nearly a third) and offered, perhaps by way of explanation,

1 "Carnegie International" is on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh through January 22. The catalogue contains essays by the exhibition's curator, John Caldwell, along with Vicky A. Clark, Thomas McEvilley, Lynne Cooke, and Milena Kalinovska (Prestel-Verlag, 153 pages, $22.95).

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the stunning remark that "the German rubble is our rubble, too." (As the day went on, leitmotifs reappeared, the rubble being right there in the centerpieces on the tables at dinner, in the form of little decorative heaps of shattered windshield glass.)

The temporary exhibition galleries at the Carnegie Museum of Art, opened in 1974, are light-filled and lavishly scaled. Though not everything in the show was especially big, the many large-sized works by Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer, Jannis Kounellis, Meyer Vaisman, and others didn't look hemmed in, the way they often do in New York. In fact, some of the largest exhibits were eaten up by the space. Wolfgang Laib's stucco building lined in fragrant beeswax looked becalmed—like a Quonset hut somebody had parked there by mistake. And smaller things—the Joel Shapiro sculptures, for instance—looked ill at ease. Shapiro's semi-abstract figures might have been on the verge of an acute case of agoraphobia.

As is clear from the names of artists that I've already mentioned, the Carnegie International was a show that pretty much kept to the sort of work any assiduous visitor to New York's galleries would already know. (Thirteen artists included in the 1988 show were also featured in 1985, the last installment of what is now a triennial event.) Yet I was surprised, stopping to talk to people in the galleries, at how many New Yorkers had come in search of fresh impressions. Some art-world insiders are flying in to see these big group shows because they expect the curators to do the work of filtering and weighing the contemporary scene for all of us. And when a new name appears—the newest one in Pittsburgh seemed to be that of Anna and Bernhard Blume, a pair of fifty-one-year-old German artists who work with photographs—they put a little mark in their notebooks and go home feeling that their horizons have been expanded.

In the catalogue, critic Thomas McEvilley, no stranger to the international show circuit, hits the nail right on the head when he compares these shows to "primitive rites or feudal religious festivals." "Large groups of humans," he explains, "gather to perform a bonding rite in the presence of art works which symbolically define and ratify the characteristics of the group." The complaints one heard at dinner about the tough lamb chops and the soggy tart crusts were complaints about a rite poorly performed. But they also reflected something else—a general sense among the visitors that Pittsburgh could never repay them enough for having come. True, Pittsburgh had on its side money and the historic allure of a show that included among its First Prize winners Picasso and among its judges Matisse; but the visitors had on their side the cachet of the moment, they controlled the names that keep the art market hot. At dinner, many found themselves seated next to "the others"—and how could an art-world celeb and a wealthy local industrialist or lawyer possibly ever bridge the gap? Incomprehension is a law of such encounters; hostility, too.

It was a week before the presidential election, and when Henry Hillman got up to make some remarks—he'd paid for the dinner, and his business, the Hillman Company, was the major corporate sponsor—he said something to the effect that his wife would be up in the galleries after dinner pressing George Bush buttons on everyone. This comment was met with a storm of applause (mostly, one assumes, from the locals), out of which, a few moments later, rose a chorus of boos (mostly, one assumes, from the art-world visitors). A New York editor who booed was told by her Pittsburgh dinner partner that he'd never encountered such bad manners. But what about the manners of Mr. Hillman? He had brought up the whole thing in the first place, and then went on to joke that those who'd booed would find a bill for dinner at their places. Then again, one could imagine reasons why Mr. Hillman might have been feeling a bit hostile toward some of the assembled guests, after he'd spent the day sitting, as a Carnegie trustee, on a jury which had ended up by giving the big prize to an artist who, one felt fairly certain, would look to him like a "rad."

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Mr. Hillman, someone hastened to assure all of us in the mini-van on the way back to the hotel, was the nicest—and most apolitical—guy in Pittsburgh.

Actually, beyond the inevitable tug of personalities and interest groups, things proceeded pretty smoothly. The art crowd appeared to be satisfied with what it saw; and the Pittsburgh crowd appeared quite willing to go along with whatever their advisory team of six international experts offered in the way of the last word on the avant-garde. Whether Pittsburgh society would hang any of this stuff on its living-room walls was another question, one that no one raised. The local critics were genial, apparently content; and Roberta Smith, writing in the *Times*, said that the show could have been more adventuresome, but she made her criticisms lightly. There was no Royal Cortissoz, the art critic of *The New York Tribune* some fifty years ago, to speak of "sickening revelations." Nor was Henry McBride, of *The New York Sun*, there to defend modern art in his lucid prose. In Pittsburgh in 1988 the arguments were familial. Everybody needed everybody else; and nobody, after the grumbling, was really going to bite the hand that fed them.

The Carnegie International is the second oldest international show in the world, founded in 1896, a year after the Venice Biennale. And if there are few people at least on this side of the Atlantic who would take a trip to Pittsburgh over a trip to Venice, the International, carrying on amid the dramatic ravines and now-picturesque industrial architecture of Rustbelt, U.S.A., has a far from inconsiderable place in the history of the reception of modern art.

While most of us could live without those Andy Warhol portraits of Andrew Carnegie that ornament the Carnegie Museum, Carnegie himself is an impressive figure. No one should underestimate the vision it took to bring the art of the wide world to Pittsburgh. And Carnegie created a place where, in succeeding years, some good people could get good work done. Many art lovers still speak fondly of Gordon Bailey Washburn, the director of the Carnegie after World War II, who made one of what were perennial efforts to bring the International in line with sophisticated national and international taste. Washburn in Pittsburgh—a patrician with a twinkle in his handsome eyes—was, like the trendier "Chick" Austin at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, one of those elegant men of taste who somehow managed to deal with the boards and the hordes. Washburn must have been a proselytizer, a persuader. A well-mannered and charismatic persuader—no other kind survives in places like Pittsburgh. In the catalogue of the 1955 International he wrote of visiting artists in "their poor roof-top studios," where "many artists and their families live within a borderland of insecurity." "Could more of us visit them," he told his Pittsburgh public, "fewer exhibition visitors would be inclined to question their seriousness or their probity."

But if good things have happened at the International over the past ninety-plus years, the triumphant moments have always been intermingled with less glorious periods. Like all the institutions devoted to the exhibition of new art, the International must be judged by the extent to which its official selections jibe with some standard of excellence that we discover beyond officialdom. (The true measure of value is always one that is evolving among artists and the small groups of collectors, dealers, and writers who are closely aligned with the taste of the artists.) By this test, the record of the Carnegie International—like the record of the French Salons and the Venice Biennales—is far from superb without being absolutely atrocious. What we have is an essentially stolid taste that from time to time has made certain adjustments in response to the forces of excellence and the forces of the new. (The two aren't always the same.)

As the chroniclers of Pittsburgh history always like to point out, for a provincial American city Pittsburgh has done pretty well. True, the International never showed

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Mondrian or Gris; and Klee and Kandinsky each appeared only once, in 1939. But by the Twenties Matisse, Braque, and Picasso were featured on a fairly regular basis. That was, of course, late; but an argument can be made that World War I, which interrupted the shows for six years, slowed the process of assimilation. On the other hand, when the School of Paris was shown, it was in its "anti-abstract" phase. Picasso won First Prize in 1930 with an Ingresque portrait of Olga; while Braque's *Yellow Cloth*, which won First Prize in 1937, was regarded as a rather daring choice. In short, the argument goes back and forth, and the bottom line is always that we judge the International's taste by some non-institutional standard that we all agree is more important.

The real question, then, is why we should continue to support and encourage shows such as the Carnegie International that everyone agrees have a hit-or-miss relation to aesthetic quality. The strong argument for our support is that, from time to time, such shows can have a positive effect on the public, by bringing better rather than worse examples of contemporary art into the limelight. Still, I think everyone who came to Pittsburgh for the International would have agreed that the top priority here wasn't an adventure in aesthetic experience but a summary of recent trends. Rather than expanding the number of artists or styles to reflect the expanding number of artists at work, the International has in fact become increasingly restrictive, so that it now deals only with a tiny group that happens to exhibit at certain top-of-the-line galleries and receives a great deal of publicity. In 1955, three hundred twenty-eight artists exhibited; in 1988, we're down to thirty-nine. As the art scene has become a jet-set scene, its horizons appear to have dropped. In the 1920s, when Charlotte Weidler was the International's German representative, she brought to Pittsburgh work by artists who were little known in America, such as Kirchner, Pechstein, Munch, and Nolde. Fifty years later, could we have expected a fresh view of Europe from Saskia Bos, the woman who runs the De Appel cultural center in Amsterdam and advised the 1985 International on what critical writings and artists' statements should represent Europe in the catalogue? Considering that what you see at De Appel looks a lot like what you see at P.S. 1 in New York, wasn't it fair to assume that the writings Bos would deem worthy of export from the Netherlands and the rest of Europe would tell us little that we didn't already know?

In the anti-authoritarian Seventies the very concept of shows such as the International had been tinkered with almost to the point of extinction. But in the Eighties we've seen an upsurge of interest in exactly this kind of institutionally sanctioned art event. The authority—and relative homogeneity—of such shows becomes a hedge against the runaway eclecticism of the scene. In this context, the pomp and circumstance really matters: it's a form of institutional self-validation. Nothing highlights this new hunger for authoritative gestures so much as the revival of the Carnegie Prize, which was abolished in 1970 and only reinstated in 1985, when it was split between Anselm Kiefer (a painter who's nostalgic for older forms of order) and Richard Serra (a sculptor who insists in any public forum available that the public doesn't know what it really wants or needs). The renewal of the Carnegie International and the Carnegie Prize are last-ditch exercises in the legitimization of institutional authority.

Curator John Caldwell went straight to the question of authority when he gave a room of their own to two putative father figures, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, who'd died since the 1985 International. Situated at the end of the first suite of galleries, Beuys's stone floor piece, called *The End of the Twentieth Century*, was some sort of essentialist statement—rock as the alpha and the omega. Meanwhile, the quartet of late Warhol self-portraits—Andy as a ghoul in a white fright wig—offered a last, rather Holy Ghost-ish view of the original postmodern cynic. Each generation likes to pay its own form of respect to the

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dead. Still, there has to be some considerable strain involved in turning these particular artists into kingpins in the line of succession of late twentieth-century art, since Beuys's and Warhol's entire careers were based on the idea of debunking artistic succession.

If Beuys and Warhol were obsessed with their authority—and they were—it was only in the sense that they each wanted to insure that his own form of ahistoricism would prevail. Yet here they were, not presented even as artistic eccentrics, or as voices of dissent—but as the lawgivers. If this is a paradox, it's one that the postmodern theorists will iron out lickety-split. When rebels such as Beuys and Warhol (however without-a-cause, aesthetically speaking, they might have been) become figures of authority, it gives renewed authority to a generation which once defined itself through a spirit of protest but is now for the most part eager to put on traditional formal dress.

What no one should underestimate is how important the legitimization—and institutionalization—of Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol is to the part of the art world that believes in events such as the Carnegie International. At some point during the day, I talked to Paul Taylor, a critic much sought after these days as a crossover from downtown aesthetics to mass-media taste. We were discussing the idea of Camp, and I mentioned the needlepoint paintings of Nicolas Moufarrege, which I think are just about the best examples of Camp in the visual arts that I've seen. Taylor was familiar with Moufarrege as an important figure in the East Village scene, but hadn't seen that many of his paintings. In any event, Taylor explained, he preferred his Camp cooled out, in the Warhol manner. When I said that I thought Moufarrege was a better artist than Warhol, Taylor looked a bit aghast, and said, "That's a very eccentric opinion." Eccentric wasn't a word this downtowner was using approvingly—it was a putdown and, in a friendly way (Taylor *is* friendly), a conversation closer. For Taylor, Warhol is mainstream; and what can't be emphasized too much is the extent to which the trendies believe in a mainstream, in lawgivers. Only, the lawgivers they believe in lay down a law of lawlessness.

When I got to talking with people at the Carnegie International, there always came a point when I was asked what I thought about the show. After making a few pretty rude remarks early in the day, I decided that silence was the best policy. But people didn't like my silence, because they sensed, correctly, that it bespoke an unwillingness to play the game, to accept the terms. I had no wish to give offense; it was just that I was so profoundly out of sympathy with the show that I hardly knew where to begin. I could make distinctions within the art that was offered at the Carnegie as well as the next person. The Kounellis shown in Pittsburgh was inferior to the one exhibited at Boone a couple of months ago; Brice Marden's version of academic Abstract Expressionism is better than Per Kirkeby's; Sigmar Polke is a more interesting abstractionist than Marden; and so on. But a show that presents Beuys and Warhol as father figures is a show I can't live with.

If the people at the Carnegie had asked me how to honor the dead, I would have told them to hang some work by Jean Hélion, a painter who died a year ago and who has had a profound impact on much of the contemporary art I care about the most—works by artists in their thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties. But in all honesty I don't think I'd want to present anything as a response to John Caldwell's choice of Beuys and Warhol. Having seen all the disasters that have been brought down upon art in recent decades by one or another concept of artistic succession, I have come to the point where I reject all such concepts of succession. What interests me is the pleasure of art—art as an experience of forms, an experience which Beuys, Warhol, et al. have done their damnedest to undo. What concerns me now are judgments of value based on *direct* experience. I would like to break up the prefabricated successions, and perhaps say that Redon (never shown in Pittsburgh) is

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more essential than Monet, or that Earl Kerkam is more essential than Willem de Kooning. To hell with the canons—with John Caldwell's, and with anybody else's, too.

In 1898, Camille Pissarro was invited to be a member of the jury of the Carnegie International. We know his thoughts on the matter from a letter to his son Lucien. "My dear Lucien," he wrote, "I am sending two paintings to America, to the exhibition in Pittsburgh. I was invited by the director, a charming man. He also invited me to be a member of this year's jury, with travelling expenses paid both ways, and for the best hotels, by the Pittsburgh Museum. I would stay for fifteen days. Naturally I declined, out of principle." What were those "principles"? No doubt they had something to do with an absolute rejection of the jury systems that had, by the 1880s, turned the French Salons into showplaces for mediocrity. We live at a moment when the institutions have failed the real—the really serious—artists as grievously as they had in Pissarro's time, a hundred years ago. And yet, how few, now, as then, would follow Pissarro's example and decline "out of principle."

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Dance

After the ball: "Cotillon" at the Joffrey

by Eva Resnikova

Of all the works Balanchine allowed to slip away during his lifetime, the 1932 *Cotillon*, created for de Basil's Ballet Russe, the first of the post-Diaghilev companies, became the most shrouded in myth and mystery. Set to seven pieces for piano by Emmanuel Chabrier, orchestrated for the occasion, the ballet was episodic in structure. The narrative, based on a scenario by Boris Kochno, was ambiguous. Eyewitness accounts abound with speculation concerning the action; viewers ended up resorting to words like "atmosphere" and "perfume" in attempting to describe the ballet's overall effect. Its logic seemed that of a dream, the dreamer a girl on the brink of adolescence attending her first ball, and experiencing her first romantic disillusion. The critic Arnold Haskell compared her presence in the ballet to that of Alice in Wonderland.

In November at City Center the Joffrey Ballet presented a reconstruction of *Cotillon*, with Balanchine's choreography staged by the dance historian Millicent Hodson, and Christian Bérard's costumes and décor reproduced under the supervision of the art historian Kenneth Archer—the same husband-and-wife team that last year brought us Nijinsky's *Sacre du printemps*, also under the Joffrey's auspices.[1] Retrieving the Balanchine ballet, which was assumed lost, had long been a dream of Robert Joffrey, who died last March at the age of fifty-eight.[2]

The re-creation of *Cotillon* was a very different affair from that of *Le Sacre*. On the surface, the givens would seem to favor the later work. *Le Sacre* had received only a handful of performances in Paris in 1913, and there remained but a single survivor, albeit an important one—Marie Rambert, who had assisted Nijinsky at rehearsals. *Cotillon*, on the other hand, enjoyed at least a decade of performances on four continents and underwent numerous changes of cast, many of whose members are still happily with us. After all, the leading lady, Tamara Toumanova, was only thirteen years old when she created the role of the Young Girl; Tatiana Riabouchinska, who took over the second lead of the Mistress of Ceremonies shortly after the premiere, was fifteen. There are even two fragmentary silent

1 For a discussion of this reconstruction, see my article "Thanks for the Memory: *Le Sacre* at the Joffrey," *The New Criterion*, January 1988.

2 Whether Joffrey ever actually saw the ballet remains unclear. When it received its premiere in Monte Carlo in 1932, Joffrey was an infant in Seattle. It remained in the repertory of the de Basil Ballet Russe until the early 1940s, which means that Joffrey himself would have been barely on the brink of adolescence had he managed to catch one of the ballet's North American performances. Hodson and Archer, recounting conversations with Joffrey during the time of the *Sacre* project, call *Cotillon* one of the "glowing memories of his youth." Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson, "The Quest for *Cotillon*," *Ballet Review*, Summer 1988.

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home movies of portions of the choreography.

And yet in one important respect the *Cotillon* material is poorer than that of *Le Sacre*: there are no documents relating movement to music. From the 1913 ballet there survive two choreographically annotated piano reductions of Stravinsky's score, used for rehearsal purposes, one belonging to the composer, the other to Rambert.[3] In the case of *Cotillon*, however, there exists no original score whatsoever. In fact, the ninety-year-old Vittorio Rieti was called in to orchestrate Chabrier's piano pieces for the Joffrey, as he had already done fifty-six years earlier for de Basil.

Unsurprisingly, then, it is on the level of musicality that the Joffrey production ultimately founders. Because *Cotillon* is a work of atmosphere and manners, with lavish costumes and scenery, and with a narrative, however loose, the musicality of its choreography might not seem as important as it would in one of Balanchine's stripped-down, so-called abstract ballets. And yet the late B. H. Haggin, an early Balanchine appreciator who had first seen the choreographer's work in London in 1929, writes:

> It was in [*Cotillon*] that I first noted the close relation of movement to music in Balanchine's work. In this ballet what I noted was merely that the movements looked right, and the music sounded right, with each other; and it was with continuing experience that I came to perceive the relation as something much more.[4]

No matter how one may feel about Haggin's outspoken prejudices in behalf of certain dancers, he was a distinguished music critic, and his observation on the relation of music to movement in *Cotillon* can be taken seriously.

Haggin's statement is given added weight by no less an authority than Lincoln Kirstein, who calls *Cotillon* "intensely musical." His description occurs in the context of a discussion of the deterioration of the de Basil production following Balanchine's departure from the company shortly after the premiere. *Cotillon*, Kirstein writes, in a book published three years after the ballet's premiere, "has no longer the freshness of its first season, since its underlying choreographic design is intensely musical, needing constant correction by its composer, who alone remembers it, or if even he also forgets, can at least invent equivalent patterns."[5]

The rapid decline of *Cotillon* is corroborated by Balanchine himself. An article on Balanchine that Haggin had published in *The Nation* of December 1940 elicited an invitation to lunch. When they met, Haggin mentioned how much he had enjoyed seeing *Cotillon* performed again by the de Basil company, then in New York. Balanchine's response was that "by now the work was very inaccurate because of all the things that had been forgotten or changed by the dancers."

At this time Balanchine was creating *Balustrade*, his first setting of Stravinsky's Violin Concerto, on the visiting de Basil troupe. Haggin was permitted to observe rehearsals, and at one point Balanchine stopped to explain to him the difference between his approach to choreography and that of Léonide Massine, who had replaced Balanchine in a behind-the-scenes power struggle as ballet master of the de Basil company. "In Massine's ballets," Balanchine said, "the dancers make some movements here; then they walk to another place and make some movements there. In my ballets the movements are all connected from

3 Robert Craft has criticized Hodson's interpretation of these annotations, generally faulting her for having the dancers dance on the music when they should be dancing against it, and for failing to observe rhythmic stresses in the choreography as indicated. But even if the information was misinterpreted, it nevertheless exists.

4 B. H. Haggin, *Discovering Balanchine* (Horizon Press, 1981). Haggin first saw *Cotillon* during the Ballet Russe's New York debut season of 1933-34.

5 Lincoln Kirstein, *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935).

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beginning to end." Kirstein, too, in his discussion of *Cotillon* contrasts Balanchine's method with Massine's: "Balanchine is always first motivated by his music; then by the individual dancers with whom he has to work. He is an instinctive composer, as opposed to an intellectual composer like Massine."

Haggin got what he calls "an impressive demonstration" of Balanchine's statement on the importance of connecting movements in his choreography when Balanchine called two rehearsals of *Cotillon* in order to correct the inaccuracies. Haggin reports: "Repeatedly the dancing was stopped for Balanchine and the dancers to search their memories and piece together the successive movements that originally had taken the dancers from one point to another in the sequence."

Every point raised about the original *Cotillon* by these eminently qualified contemporary observers—the essential relation of music to choreography; the importance of connecting movements; the exploitation of the individual dancer's personal qualities; the deterioration of the ballet after only a few seasons of Balanchine's absence; and the need for continual correction by the choreographer himself—militates against its successful reconstruction.

As mentioned, no document exists relating Balanchine's movements to Chabrier's music, even on the most elementary level of choreographic counts to musical beats, as in a Labanotation score. Ballets mounted from notation are often lifeless because this system cannot record subtleties of phrasing and articulation, but they can be accurate. This appears to be the case, for example, in the American Ballet Theatre staging from Labanotation of Balanchine's 1945 Mozart *Symphonie concertante*. If notation is used to jog the memory of someone who participated in the original production, and the dancers have been schooled in a compatible style, the result can be genuine, as in the Tulsa Ballet's revival of Balanchine's 1942 *Mozart Violin Concerto*, seen for the first time in New York in October at Brooklyn College. In mounting *Cotillon*, Hodson was forced to rely solely on the memories of dancers who had performed the ballet forty-five to fifty-five years earlier, and musically it shows. Purely on the basis of the Joffrey production, one would never come away with Haggin's conclusion about the intimate relation of movement to music in Balanchine's choreography.

As for connecting movements, by their very nature these are the first to be forgotten or changed by the performers. If Balanchine and his dancers needed two rehearsals in 1940 to "search their memories" in order to correct inaccuracies that had crept in over a few years of continual performance, how much credence can be given to the half-century-old memories of the dancers consulted by Hodson? Not only were there discrepancies in their recollections, but at some points the dancers simply drew blanks, and Hodson was forced to create her own transitions. All in all, a situation that does not inspire confidence.

One section of the ballet is a special case. This is the Hand (or Hands) of Fate pas de deux, which was choreographed before the rest of the ballet and continued to be performed on its own when *Cotillon* was dropped from the repertory. Roman Jasinski, the founder with his wife, Moscelyne Larkin, of the Tulsa Ballet, had danced the role of the Cavalier in the pas de deux at the ballet's Paris premiere in June 1932, following the world premiere at Monte Carlo; Larkin, who had been in the de Basil corps de ballet, danced the pas de deux with Jasinski in a touring chamber ballet company well into the 1950s. They later staged it for the Tulsa troupe, first in 1968 and again in 1983. Here, then, was the possibility of a truly authentic performance; and, indeed, my memory of the pas de deux as danced by members of the Tulsa troupe at Brooklyn College in 1983 was of a sublime experience.

Yet even with the Jasinskis' participation, the pas de deux at the Joffrey failed to come off, leading one inevitably to conclude that these dancers are simply not up to it. Their inability to fulfill the requirements of a

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humorous, demi-caractère role like the Master of Ceremonies is not surprising, but the Hand of Fate is the purest Balanchinean classicism. One longs to see it performed by more able classical dancers, though it seems too much to hope that Balanchine's own company will take up the challenge.

For the aficionado who can override in his mind's eye questionable choreography and substandard performance, there nevertheless remains much of interest in the Joffrey *Cotillon*. The greatest surprise is that the Balanchine work it most resembles is not the Ravel *La Valse* of 1951, as was generally thought, but the 1946 *La Sonnambula*, a disquieting gothic romance set to music of Bellini—by coincidence, arranged by Rieti. Both take place at a masked ball and create a mood of forced gaiety belied by a darker undercurrent—of melancholy and disillusion in the former, cruelty and horror in the latter. In both the merrymaking is interrupted by a transcendent pas de deux—the Cavalier with Fate, the Poet with the Sleepwalker. Haggin applies the same term, "*fantaisie Balanchine*," to describe the Hand of Fate and, years later, the Sleepwalker pas de deux, which he witnessed at its first rehearsal, with Alexandra Danilova and Nicholas Magallanes. And though Toumanova danced the Young Girl and not the Hand of Fate, it is nevertheless of interest that the perceptive André Levinson, reviewing *Cotillon* in its first season, writes of the "*reveuse*" Toumanova, with her "*torpeur de somnambule*."[6]

In press material, apparently prepared by Hodson, *Cotillon* is described as "a seminal work in the development of the Balanchine style." But it seems rather the last gasp of an era and a style that Balanchine was eager to leave behind. In October 1933, at the invitation of Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine arrived in America with the aim of establishing a school and eventually an American classical ballet company. The School of American Ballet opened its doors on December 22. That night, the de Basil Ballet Russe opened at the St. James Theatre, with Toumanova dancing Balanchine's *Concurrence*, which had had its premiere in Monte Carlo the same night in 1932 as *Cotillon*. Kirstein noted in his diary that Balanchine, watching the ballet for the first time from the audience, said he was "through forever with that kind of stuff" and had lots of new ideas.[7]

In the end, the reputed stature of *Cotillon* as a masterpiece appears undue—a conclusion that would help to account for Balanchine's abiding lack of interest in any revival. In fact, the ballet seems in many ways a kind of masterly pièce d'occasion, tossed off in a few days amid a partylike atmosphere by three young men, and celebrating that fleeting moment in a young girl's life when she is enticingly poised on the brink of womanhood. The artless virtuosity of the baby ballerinas, hurling themselves into fouettés and multiple pirouettes with the fearlessness of youth, might well be a metaphor for their unconscious sexual allure—to which Balanchine was by all accounts vulnerable, though under the watchful eye of the ever-present ballet mamas.

Once again one stands in awe of Hodson and Archer's prodigious scholarship and is thankful to have had the opportunity to witness the results, however unsatisfying they may be as art. As for the Joffrey, let us allow Balanchine—with Haggin his Boswell—the final word. The time is 1968, and Balanchine is fuming over a review in *The New York Times* in which Clive Barnes claims that the Joffrey's performance of Balanchine's *Scotch Symphony* is better than his own New York City Ballet's. Balanchine: "I gave them my ballets in the beginning to help them; but no more. They have their dancers; they have their Arpino; let them make their own ballets. I have beautiful dancers whom I have trained; and my dancers will perform my ballets."

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6 André Levinson, *Les Visages de la danse* (Grasset, 1933), p. 75.

7 Quoted in Richard Buckle and John Taras, *George Balanchine: Ballet Master* (Random House, 1988), p. 82.

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Books

Father Babbitt's flock

by Terry Teachout

A man of one book is easy to figure. So is a man of many books. It is the man of a few good books who is hard to pin down. Take J. F. Powers. By the age of forty-five, Powers had written a grand total of three books: *Prince of Darkness*, published in 1947; *The Presence of Grace*, published in 1956; and *Morte d'Urban*, published in 1962. Still, his gifts were acknowledged by critics ranging from Evelyn Waugh to Gore Vidal, and he was regularly mentioned in tandem with Flannery O'Connor as one of the most promising young Catholic writers in America. When *Morte d'Urban*, Powers's first novel, won the National Book Award in 1963, F. W. Dupee, another critical admirer, rightly remarked that its author enjoyed "an inconspicuous fame."

That fame trailed off to next to nothing in the succeeding quarter century, during which Powers published only one other book, a slender collection of prose sketches and work in progress called *Look How the Fish Live*. No selected essays, no collected letters, no regular appearances on the campus lecture circuit, no groaning casebooks of close readings appeared in the wake of *Morte d'Urban*. Powers allowed his reputation, such as it was, to be sustained solely by four books published roughly a decade apart. Not surprisingly, he soon became a ghostly figure.

Why has J. F. Powers published so little? Back in 1963, he told Pete Hamill that his modest output up to that time was due in part to the fact that he earned his living as a teacher. "I usually teach creative writing courses," he said, "and I read the damned things, the stories, and sometimes I wish that I had that story, because I could do something with it. As a result, I don't do my own work." As for his long silence since *Morte d'Urban*, he explained it recently to a *New York Times* reporter as follows:

> My wife was sick for a long time before she died. [Author Betty Wahl, Powers's wife, died of cancer last May.] That was part of it. And basically I'm lazy. But I was somewhat despairing after *Morte d'Urban*, which sold only 25,000 copies in seven printings. I could not get the publisher to print enough. A couple of months after *Morte d'Urban* won the National Book Award, it went out of print. They let it run out.

But J. F. Powers, though silent, was not forgotten, as the publication this fall of his second novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, proved.[1] Profiles and interviews suddenly began appearing in a variety of respectable venues as the word began to get around that Powers, at the age of seventy-one, finally had a new book coming out. The reviews were universally favorable, and a second National Book Award nomination followed in due course. The lackluster reputation of a half-

1 *Wheat That Springeth Green*, by J. F. Powers; Knopf, 335 pages, $18.95.

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remembered writer had somehow regained its old patina. For once, a cautionary tale of the literary life had a happy—and well-deserved—ending.

The long road that led to *Wheat That Springeth Green* began in Jacksonville, Illinois, where James Farl Powers was born in 1917. His father was a plant manager for the Swift Packing Company. "My first serious writer," Powers says, "was Sinclair Lewis . . . . [H]e said things about people, about society, about institutions that I hadn't realized were being thought or said or printed. Lewis made me realize that I was not so odd or strange or out of it as I thought."

A child of the Great Depression, Powers attended night classes at Northwestern University but could not afford to stay long enough to get a degree. After a frustrating search for employment, he went to work in a Chicago bookstore. "Finally," he said in 1963, "I began to think, maybe *I'm* a writer. Maybe that's what I should do. It was mostly anger. Anger at not being able to get a job; anger at the plight of the Negro; anger at other things I was just beginning to see." A conscientious objector, Powers spent thirteen months in a Minnesota prison during World War II. By 1943, he had settled in Minnesota and had published three prose sketches in the *Catholic Worker*.

In that same year, Powers began contributing to *Accent*, the prestigious University of Illinois quarterly which, three years later, bought Flannery O'Connor's first published story. The second story Powers sold to *Accent* was "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," a sensitively written tale of a dying priest. The stylistic sureness of "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," which would eventually become one of the most widely anthologized of modern American short stories, came as a surprise to the editors of *Accent*. As they later recalled in the introduction to *Accent: An Anthology 1940-60*:

> Once in the early 1940s the editors somewhat reluctantly (and after heavy blue-penciling and "improving"—which the author, surprisingly, agreed to) printed a story based on the already hackneyed subject of Negro jazz musicians in a city night club. A few months later the same author submitted a second story so extraordinarily different in theme and superior in writing that the editors could hardly believe it came out of the same typewriter.

J. F. Powers met and married Betty Wahl in 1946 and began to teach creative writing at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. A year later, he published *Prince of Darkness*, his first collection of short stories. The book received good reviews, and Powers was spotted as an up-and-coming Catholic writer by no less an expert than Evelyn Waugh. "The book is Catholic," Waugh said in his review of the English edition of *Prince of Darkness*. "Mr. Powers has a full philosophy with which to oppose the follies of his age and nation."

Many of Evelyn Waugh's non-Catholic readers, of course, would have viewed his remarks as sufficient reason to ignore J. F. Powers altogether. In the late Forties, literary critics commonly assumed that an openly Catholic writer was necessarily engaged in narrow propagandizing for the Faith. The situation was particularly oppressive in the United States, where the Catholic tradition was still decidedly anti-intellectual. "You probably have not imagined what it is to write as a Catholic," Flannery O'Connor wrote to Carl Hartman in 1954, "knowing that most of the people who read you will think what you believe is utter rubbish . . . . I have read people (Orwell) who say Catholics can't write novels on acct. of being Catholics."

O'Connor sidestepped this problem by eliminating Catholic characters from her stories altogether. J. F. Powers's solution was more direct and, in a way, more subtle: he started writing about priests. Powers never attended a seminary and, by his own account, never wanted to be a priest. ("I didn't want a life of having to deal with everybody. Every old woman, every drunk or wife of a drunk, the constant traffic of people which is the

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priest's work.") But all of the best stories in *Prince of Darkness* deal with the daily lives of Roman Catholic priests and their parishioners. Powers's specialty, moreover, is not merely the priesthood *per se* but the priesthood as practiced in the cities and small towns of Minnesota and the Midwest. For the most part, his clerics are paunchy, irritable types more concerned with the size of last week's collection than the state of their souls.

"This country is decidedly a specialist's country," J. F. Powers said in 1963, "and I think it's happened to me. I know that sounds like I'm a gall bladder man, but it does happen." But Powers gets all there is to be gotten out of his particular literary specialty. His clerical tales are meticulous sketches of a distinctive part of the American scene. They are also extremely funny. Powers's comic sense is something which could not reasonably have been expected from the creator of Father Didymus, the dying priest of "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does." Unlike the saintly Father Didymus, most of the other priests in *Prince of Darkness* are Babbitts in reversed collars, transplanted from Zenith, Ohio, to Minnesota with a slight change of occupation along the way. Their sermons and small talk are recorded with a flawless ear, their environment described with a cool and acerbic eye. In the title story from *Prince of Darkness*, for example, Father Ernest "Boomer" Burner, a frustrated curate who yearns for a church of his own, observes one of his more flamboyant parishioners:

> Mr. Tracy shed his shabby anonymity for Father Burner, and grew executive markings. He became the one and only Thomas Nash Tracy—T.N.T. . . . His company's advertising smothered the town and country; everybody knew the slogan "T.N.T. Spells Security." He figured in any financial drive undertaken by the diocese, was caught by photographers in orphanages, and sat at the heavy end of the table at communion breakfasts. Hundreds of nuns, thanks to his thoughtfulness, ate capon on Christmas Day, and a few priests of the right sort received baskets of scotch. He was a B.C.L., a Big Catholic Layman, and now Father Burner could see why.

By concentrating on the secular aspects of the priestly life, J. F. Powers avoided the parochialism that has long been the curse of Catholic fiction writers. His tone was even sufficiently urbane for him to publish in *The New Yorker*—a magazine where the blunter, more grotesque parables of Flannery O'Connor were misunderstood and unwelcome. This lightness of touch, coupled with an absence of the more obvious kinds of religious sentimentality, misled some commentators into thinking that Powers's choice of subject matter had nothing to do with his spiritual convictions. "Mr. Powers," Peter De Vries went so far as to suggest in his introduction to a 1963 collection of Powers's short stories about priests, "does not seem to me a religious writer at all. He is undoubtedly a religious man, but that is something else entirely."

J. F. Powers is certainly a religious man, but he is quite clearly a religious (or, if you prefer, spiritual) writer as well. His stories invariably revolve around a single question: How is it that ordinary people, with all their commonplace failings, can do the work of God? Powers approaches this simple but intriguing paradox from a dozen different angles, and the fundamental incongruity which it implies is the source of his richest humor. In "Prince of Darkness," Father Burner, through desultory indulgence in the seven deadly sins, is actually transformed into a devil—the most petty and preposterous of devils, to be sure, but one in whom the transformation is so complete that the reader is even allowed to catch a fleeting glance of diabolic features. ("Father Burner, applying a cloven foot to the pedal, gave it the gas.")

Having found his métier, J. F. Powers had the wit to stick with it. He wrote slowly and carefully, producing an occasional story about secular characters but generally remaining loyal to the dryly comic tone and

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idiosyncratic subject matter which had served him so well.

Powers's second story collection, *The Presence of Grace*, was more consistent in quality than *Prince of Darkness* but lacked the high points of the earlier volume. ("I agree with you that nothing in this present collection of Powers equals the best in the first," Flannery O'Connor wrote to a friend in 1956. "However, who am I to be saying that in public?") Two of the stories in *The Presence of Grace* which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, "Death of a Favorite" and "Defection of a Favorite," made use of a rectory cat as narrator, a Saki-like device which Powers carried off with ease and charm but which is an unconvincing departure from his customary acerbity.

The Presence of Grace, though engaging, suggested at times that the formula which had brought Powers so much success in *Prince of Darkness* might be reaching a point of diminishing returns. This suspicion was laid to rest with the publication in 1962 of Powers's first novel, *Morte d'Urban*. Installments of the novel, which took Powers more than six years to complete, appeared at intervals in various American magazines between 1956 and 1962, and some critics suggested that it was not a true novel but a succession of short stories unconvincingly stitched together. They were wrong. *Morte d'Urban* is sectional, even picaresque, in its approach. But it holds together brilliantly—so brilliantly, in fact, as to add up to one of the most impressive comic novels written by an American.

Father Urban, "fifty-four, tall and handsome but a trifle loose in the jowls and red of eye," is the quintessential J. F. Powers priest. Having drifted into the priesthood without any obvious vocation, he treats it precisely as he would any other job: with one eye firmly fixed on the main chance. The star preacher of the Clementines, a midwestern order which "labored under the curse of mediocrity," the peripatetic Father Urban, whose thoroughly modern mottos are "Be a winner" and "You may be right," ministers to his flock with hearty sermons and after-dinner speeches:

> [Father Urban] was true to his vow of poverty—to the spirit, though, rather than the letter. For someone in his position, it could not very well be otherwise. Always, after an accounting at the Novitiate, there would be a surplus: not Mass stipends, which had to be turned in and processed, but personal gifts from grateful laymen and understanding pastors, fives, tens, and twenties literally forgotten among Father Urban's effects or prudently held out because traveling first-class cost so much more than a tight-fisted bursar could be expected to make allowances for without losing respect for himself and his job.

Morte d'Urban begins when the Father Provincial of the Order of St. Clement, sensing that his star preacher has grown too big for his collar, assigns him to a rundown retreat in the wilds of Minnesota. Father Urban promptly puts his go-getting energies to work and turns the monastery into a four-star lay retreat complete with a beautifully tended golf course. The building of this elaborate institution is used as the occasion for an equally elaborate *tour d'horizon* of small-town life in Minnesota in which Powers divides his satirical potshots between the foibles of the Catholic Church and the vulgarities of middle-class America in the age of Eisenhower.

Father Urban's comeback takes a sharp turn for the worse when he is hit on the head with a stray golf ball, a physical jolt that is accompanied by his belated recognition of the moral deficiencies of Billy Cosgrove, the arrogant Catholic tycoon whom Urban has previously seen as his greatest "catch." ("I happen to know that the Dalmatians are making a play for this man.") He loses his nerve and becomes fearful and uncertain. This being precisely the right state of mind for a new Father Provincial of the Order of St. Clement's, Father Urban is promptly tapped for the post. But he renounces his worldly ways in the very moment of his triumph—though whether the "death" of the old Father Urban is the product of inward contemplation or a delayed effect of concussion by golf ball is deliberately left vague.

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The fate of Father Urban offers ample opportunity for excesses of religious sentiment, and it is to Powers's credit that he avoids them completely. We are invited, if it suits us, to dismiss Father Urban's "conversion," but the author himself clearly regards it with the utmost seriousness. It is Powers's sense of literary grace that allows him to leave the question unresolved, and he handles with similar reticence the subtle references to the Arthurian legend around which *Morte d'Urban* is built. The tone of *Morte d'Urban* is predominantly comic; Powers's larger purpose is expressed as a discreet undertone of spirituality that gives unexpected resonance to a genuinely touching book.

Morte d'Urban was a hard act to follow, and J. F. Powers, as it turned out, would have a good deal of trouble following it. To be sure, he announced that he was embarked on a new novel, two long chapters of which subsequently appeared in *The New Yorker*. Powers also published a scattering of stories and sketches in other magazines. But his novel remained incomplete, and he made the ultimate gesture of futility in 1975 by publishing a story collection, *Look How the Fish Live*, which contained "Bill" and "Priestly Fellowship," the two chapters of his unfinished novel. Despite their high quality, the rest of *Look How the Fish Live* had a sketchy, unpolished air, and the book received mixed reviews.

After spending a decade living with his family in Dublin, Powers returned to St. John's University to teach writing and care for his dying wife. His byline became less and less common, and he did nothing to compensate for its growing rarity. The Hogarth Press reissued Powers's books in paperback in England, but they remained out of print in America. His admirers gradually and reluctantly concluded that the rich comic talent that was on display in *Morte d'Urban* had simply dried up.

Then, last August, J. F. Powers brought out *Wheat That Springeth Green*, in which "Bill" and "Priestly Fellowship" at last found their proper place in yet another comic novel about a middle-aged priest. In *Wheat That Springeth Green*, however, the underlying premise of *Morte d'Urban* is reversed. Father Urban was a secular man who ultimately attained sanctity; Joe Hackett, the hero of *Wheat That Springeth Green*, enters the priesthood and, initially obsessed with sanctity, is gradually coarsened by the grinding pressures of everyday parish life.

Wheat That Springeth Green is not as finished an artistic product as *Morte d'Urban*. The old J. F. Powers attacked the vulgarization of the church in America through satire and indirection. *Wheat That Springeth Green* makes the same points in the same way, but Joe Hackett is also allowed to do more than a little complaining of his own, in the course of which one hears a crotchety authorial voice that the younger Powers would have taken care to avoid. ("We used to stand out in the crowd," Joe says of the Catholic Church. "We had quality control. We were the higher-priced spread. No more.") In addition, the charges of slackness wrongly leveled at *Morte d'Urban* are far more applicable to *Wheat That Springeth Green*. The great set pieces of *Morte d'Urban* gain added strength from their context in the complete novel. But the seams that join "Bill" and "Priestly Fellowship" to the rest of *Wheat That Springeth Green* are perhaps too visible to the naked eye.

In the end, *Wheat That Springeth Green* is likely to strike the reader familiar with Powers's other books as not quite necessary—a trope on *Morte d'Urban*, so to speak, rather than the product of a fresh and fully independent artistic conception. But Powers has not lost his sharp eye for the absurdities of priestly life in a secular society. (What other novelist could extract laughs from a hair shirt?) And if the best parts of *Wheat That Springeth Green* are the chapters which originally appeared in *Look How the Fish Live*, it is still satisfying to see how ingeniously Powers has developed them. *Wheat That Springeth Green*, in short, is no *Morte d'Urban*, but it is a witty and moving book in its own right.

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"Some of the new book," Powers said in a recent interview, "might be a little too subtle for a lot of people. It's not the kind of thing I'll clean up on." No doubt. Powers is precisely the kind of minor master whom most American readers (and many American critics) do not understand very well. But within the comparatively narrow framework of what he has tried to do, he is at his best quite nearly perfect. One need not be a skeptic to appreciate his wit; one need not be religious to appreciate his spirituality. And the smallness of his output is redeemed by its exceptional quality. To have written a dozen first-rate short stories and a comic novel comparable to *Cakes and Ale* or *Black Mischief* requires no apology. It is an unalloyed pleasure to have J. F. Powers back, and one hopes that *Wheat That Springeth Green* will not be his last word on the splendors and miseries of the Roman Catholic Church in Minnesota.

Boyhood adventure

Walter de la Mare Desert Islands. Faber and Faber, 305 pages, $10.95

reviewed by Brock Baker

Thirty-two years after Walter de la Mare's death, his stories, his poems, and his many miscellaneous works hold little if any sway in the educated mind, with the exceptions perhaps of an idiosyncratic anthology of dream- and sleep-related literature called *Behold the Dreamer!*, which retains a bibelot-type allegiance among a small circle, and the much more widely known single poem "The Listeners," with its revenant or (literally) haunting imagery, its echoes of chivalric duty and romance, and its overall open-ended meaning, the dubious fruit of the Neo-Platonism de la Mare shares with Shelley, among other English poets.

Yet when there appeared in the frenetic hurly-burly of our fall publishing season this reissue of a long-forgotten, miscellaneous work from this author—an eccentrically organized essay about tales of adventure, "the romantic," solitude, and desert islands, in both fact and fiction—it made a surprisingly diverting impression.

Seventy-two pages of an essay, followed by two hundred twenty-four pages of notes—a bizarre arrangement to say the least, and one which presents even the most obliging of readers with a conundrum. Does he look up each note as it appears, thereby so long delaying his return to the text as to lose the sense, tone, and pace of it? Or does he ignore the superscripts, plough through the seventy-two pages, and then, taking a firmer grip on his hat, plunge on through the notes, trusting to a sufficient recall of the master text to (roughly) fit in the highlighted personage, work, notion, historical fact, or quotation that the note refers to?

Either way, the peculiar, ramshackle, and sweetly amiable character of the work will soon make itself felt. In the first few pages the author ambles his way through a few notions and loosely argued statements as to the nature of humankind and human existence, and the perennial and primeval appeal of what he calls a "Tale of Adventure," or "chapters in the tale whereof we know neither the beginning nor the end—that of Man's supreme venture into the world without, and into the world within." Shortly thereafter, we discover what prompted this hodgepodge in the first place, and remains its fulcrum and kindly light: the profound admiration felt by de la Mare as both boy and man for the novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, which is an account, as everybody knows, of a man being marooned for twenty-eight years on a South Sea island. A perhaps off-puttingly "bookish" reason, one might easily conclude, and there is no question that *Desert Islands* has some of the closed-in air of a study or library about it. Its author is constantly taking down a book from the shelves and showing it to us and reading from it: from *Crusoe* itself, from *Journal of the Plague Year* by the same author; from other famous works which deal with islands—Thomas More's *Utopia*, for

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instance, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Treasure Island*, or *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But he does so with such gusto, with such unalloyed delight, that we "listen" quite happily. We are as charmed by de la Mare's personality as he was by Crusoe's, and by extension, Defoe's.

> Even to *think* of his admirable hermit is to be cheerful and to take heart of grace. He [Crusoe] watered his small stock of ink "till it was so pale it scarce left any appearance of black upon the paper"—a piece of universal experience which is almost an epitome of a man's life on earth! "He endeavoured to breed pigeons up tame, and did so, but when they grew older they all flew away." What is it that suffuses a hundred such passages as these with the shimmer of shot silk? Humour, of course, but that mixed with *good* humour, tolerance, childlikeness—a host of things . . . .

Another pleasure the book provides is the author's acute summaries of certain notable authors' sensibilities. Here he compares Edgar Allan Poe's with Defoe's:

> Fine though the shade of difference between Defoe's and Poe's verisimilitude may be, it is conspicuous. [Poe] is more careful, logical, coherent and consequential. Moreover a slightly narcotic atmosphere is over all his fiction; it is full of the dark and even its stars are dangerous . . . . The clarity of mind in Poe's stories is not quite normal either. Nor is the fine sharp edge of his senses, eye and ear. Compare Crusoe's terror at the footprint with the first few pages of *The Maelstrom* . . . . There is a sustained interest in Defoe, in Poe a continuous slight excitement. In both authors the matter-of-factness is only a device, effective even when it is found out . . . . [T]he influence of Poe over the mind of his devotee is extreme—so long, at least, as his incantations last. On those who are out of sympathy with him it is worse than *nil*.

Then there are the amusing stray facts and observations made by actual mariners visiting actual islands. For instance, de la Mare tells us that when two adult goats confront each other on a mountainous path too narrow for either to turn around in, "they gaze steadily for a while at each, and then at some secret understanding between them one of them gently lowers himself to a kneeling posture, the other as gingerly picks his way forward over his back."

So far so good. But even to the appreciative reader *Desert Islands*, in toto, poses a riddle. Why, given that much of its matter is weighty—e.g., the essential solitude of humankind or the inexplicable suffering of the apparently innocent—does it remain only a more or less delightful *folie* of a book, a "curiosity" merely?

The answer I believe is simple, although apparently not one that is as clear to the author as it is to this reader. The theme of desert islands, centering on the delight de la Mare takes in the reading and rereading of *Robinson Crusoe*, fixes him in the condition of boyhood—say, between ages seven and eleven—and all his observations are made from that point of view, as if the fifty-eight-year-old author was essentially that age. His delight in *Crusoe*, for instance, is not that of the adult who has read the book as a boy and upon rereading it discovers something about it that impresses him as an adult. He rereads it, and then attempts to get his reader to agree that the *frisson* a boy gets from, say, Crusoe's discovery of the footprint in the sand after fifteen years of solitude is reproducible in the adult, because, apparently, it is for him. He becomes that boy all over again. The fact is, most adult readers cannot and do not enjoy the books they enjoyed as boys (or girls) in the same way as they did then. The pleasures they derive from the later reading are different ones—inevitably, one would have thought anyway.

Initially, de la Mare appears to appreciate that the appeal of many of the tales of adventure he cites is much more intense or absorbing at that earlier age, with its pre-sexual, comradely approach to relationships, its delight in physical adventure, its yearnings for escape to exotic locales. But what is peculiar is that the author still feels free to generalize about the human condition as

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if it remains fixed in the limited and what to most is the passing nature of the boy. Many of his remarks seem either clumsy, inadequate, or plain wrong, unless one bears this in mind. For instance, "We pine for the curious, the bizarre. We return to find our peace in the familiar and the near." An apt remark about the mind of a child as expressed by his play, and the basis for stories directed specifically at them, but does it really describe adults? Or his complaint: "We dull life by a mechanical imitation and repetition"; doesn't it sound more like a ten-year-old wishing he didn't have to learn the multiplication table than a fellow adult bemoaning his and our spiritual stultification? And isn't the writer of this non-ironic praise of an unidentified book about islands that same boy? "[O]pen it at random, and instantly the spirit is set free. 'There are quantities of snakes . . . on these banks.' 'Northward . . . the character of the bottom changes to globigerina ooze'—a lyric in two words and, in fact, pure poetry." We may readily agree with the author that there are "vestiges" of the boy (and the girl) in the most weatherbeaten adult, but there is much else besides, and the latter is what seems to be missing from the sensibility to be found in *Desert Islands*.

Curious, bizarre, eccentric, doggedly and even narrowingly boyish, the author of *Desert Islands* nevertheless proves that a hodgepodge on several levels is not always a waste of time. For the author's playful delight in what interests him from a selection of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and some twentieth-century works, in combination with the intrinsic excellence of many of the works in themselves, has a tonic effect. In the bleak climate for literature created by currently fashionable writing about the written word, when the deconstructionist, the neo-Marxist, and the dry-as-dust academic specialist vie for supremacy before an intimidated or indifferent audience, such a personally ingratiating, fireside-chat type of work, which also treats the literature of the past as worthy of perusal and re-perusal, offers an "old-fashioned" way of living with literature that is both serious and pleasure-seeking, affectionate and respectful. "The fact is, that until one has read again and again and with extreme care such poems . . . as the odes *To Psyche* or *To Melancholy*, it is impossible to realize how *strange* a thing poetry is, how miraculous was 'the working brain' of John Keats . . . ."

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Letters

William Carlos Williams

To the Editors:

I would like to comment on Bruce Bawer's review of William Carlos Williams in the September issue of *The New Criterion*.

Bawer has a few useful things to say, but taken as a whole his article struck me as an almost willful misrepresentation of the man and his work. Is it really necessary to subtract from Williams in order to add to Eliot? And if so, why? Eliot was, if you like, the greater poet, and Williams's quarrel with him had its unfortunate side, but it was at least consistent with the direction of his thought, expressed throughout his life in verse and prose: that there is (was?) in the New World a true theme, a new idea, a freshness, waiting to be discovered and given form. In all phases of his career, Williams was true to that. If he was, or seemed at times to be, incoherent, that was in part the price of his originality.

If you choose the right details and are clever enough in arranging them, you might make anyone's life and work look pathetic or ridiculous. A more generous estimate of Williams would be to place him, along with Whitman, Charles Ives, and Emily Dickinson, as one of the original American spirits. Bawer's reduction of him to a kind of bumbling amateur is a disservice. Perhaps without intending to, Bawer perpetuates the odd notion that Williams lacked both intellect and sophistication; by implication he, Bawer, has both, and is by so much authorized to put Williams in his place.

Among the more glaring of Bawer's errors is his slighting reference to *In the American Grain*, one of the profound and resonant American books. This passion and insight brought to bear on a nation's history is not to be so casually dismissed. Contrary to the impression given by Bawer, much of it is brilliantly written, a fact I have confirmed recently in re-reading parts of it. Whatever it may owe to Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, it is utterly unlike that book.

With what seems to be condescending approval, Bawer quotes from *Spring and All* one of Williams's most accomplished and engaging poems. He does so without sufficiently noticing that the movement of the poem follows with precision the poet's attention to the details he presents. Williams's avoidance of transitional devices is deliberate and successful. The same might be said for many of Williams's more memorable poems—"To Elsie," "These," "The Yachts," etc.—poems that could have been written in no other form, could hardly be imagined in anything like traditional measures. Moreover, such poems have, and notably, what most present-day poems lack: a certain largeness and thingness of involvement with the world and with people, a largeness in which there is room for astute social comment, as well as for the minute particulars of ordinary life.

As for Bawer's discussion of Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," my impression, here as elsewhere, is that Bawer simply cannot read the poem for what it is, and must discount it for not being something else. The poem, however, speaks for itself. As any moderately intelligent reader can

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discover, it is precisely Williams's placing of a few essential details in isolation and in a certain order that makes all the difference. In other words, the poem works. To explain or belittle it, following either Marjorie Perloff or Bawer (take your choice), is nothing else than pedantry.

The modernist revolution may be over and, typical of revolutions, has left in its wake mainly confusion and the petty tyranny of factions. But what remains most important is the astonishing variety and richness of American poetry in the first half of the century; an achievement that includes Eliot *and* Williams, includes Pound, Jeffers, Stevens, Crane, Moore, Cummings, and a number of other people, none of whom resemble each other in either manner or substance. Williams's contribution to that achievement was substantial and unique, and to diminish it as Bawer does seems to me to serve no useful purpose.

In passing, Bawer makes approving reference to the new formalism. While wishing all good fortune to those by whom this work is done—and some of them are friends of mine—I doubt that the rescue of poetry from the prosaic mediocrity that afflicts it lies much in that direction. The typical poem of today will be just as lacking in substance whether written in free verse, plain prose, or in formal measures. In most cases, form only incidentally enhances an otherwise trivial content.

Poetry is born of a certain attention paid to the world, to events, things, and persons. This attention has a way of placing objects and events in some hitherto unrealized relation to each other, a relation that results in something for which we have no better word than *truth*. How this is done is the question, and the secret. The decisive fact seems to be just what it is, precisely, that one finds most significant in the world, of all that might otherwise *seem* important. Questions of verse form are not irrelevant to this attention, even when the explicit form is not entirely a matter of individual choice. The single justification for choosing one form over another is the accomplished poem.

Bawer's article raises far more than it resolves, and a letter such as this is an inadequate form in which to respond to it. One thing that emerges inadvertently is that we no longer look to poetry (or to the novel) itself for what we most need to know, but rather to commentaries on it. The reputation of a critic like Helen Vendler appears to rest partly on this fact, and in its own way Bawer's essay confirms it. Without fully realizing it, we have entered an age of biography and explanation.

In reference to another of Bawer's remarks, one final note: fundamentally speaking, there *are* no ideas but in things. It is this fact that has always sent artists and thinkers back to nature—to the visible, tangible, physical world—for confirmation and a fresh insight. In his understanding of this, as in much else, Williams was more intelligent and consistent than Bawer gives him credit for being.

John Haines
Djerassi Foundation
Woodside, CA

Bruce Bawer replies:

Mr. Haines's letter is a classic case of Williams-style critical sputtering: he meanders about, fails to support provocative assertions, drowns his ideas in banal, disjointed chitchat. I'm not surprised that he thinks *In the American Grain* is brilliantly written; clearly, Williams taught him everything he knows about prose style and critical method.

I hardly know how to defend myself from such erratic thrusts. But it does seem worthwhile to examine briefly the terms in which Haines defends Rutherford's poet of "largeness and thingness." Take his gloss on "The Red Wheelbarrow": he writes that "it is precisely Williams's placing of a few essential details in isolation and in a certain order that makes all the difference." What difference? Haines doesn't elaborate. He claims that "the poem works." But he doesn't support this claim. He doesn't even seem to mean, really, that the poem works *aesthetically*. Rather, he appears to be suggesting that it makes a comprehensible pseudo-statement (to borrow a term from the New Critical lexicon). Or something like that. Precisely what the poem does for him must remain a mystery, however, since he feels that any attempt to explain a poem "is nothing else than pedantry."

Thus, for Haines, the sham explications of a

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Perloff-type academic and the sincere attempts of a non-Perloffian critic to account for a poem's aesthetic effect amount to one and the same thing. Such inanity, of course, is to be expected of a dutiful poet-soldier in the post-Williams army, whose members not only are unaccustomed to thinking critically about poetry, but share Williams's own deep hostility toward the very idea of critical intelligence. Haines implies that "biography and explanation" have eclipsed poetry in our time, but while sensationalistic biographers and sham explicators have indeed proliferated in recent years, the continuing neglect of American poetry has little to do with these phenomena. Certainly, this neglect owes much more to the slovenliness and self-indulgence of many contemporary poets—a number of them, like Haines, followers of Williams—than to the efforts of plain-speaking poetry critics to make distinctions among our poets' productions, and thereby to identify (for a reading public overwhelmed by the number of self-styled poets, and more than ever skeptical of their demands on its attention) a few sapphires in the mud.

Frankfurter's "Art News"

To the Editors:

I feel sure that I am not alone in having been disturbed by Deborah Solomon's review of Eleanor Munro's book *Memoir of a Modernist's Daughter* in the September issue of *The New Criterion*. What could it have been about this delightful book to have caused such venom? I shall comment, however, only on that part in which Miss Solomon says that *Art News*, under Alfred Frankfurter's direction, was "notoriously hostile to the Abstract Expressionists" before the late 1940s. It is perfectly true that Frankfurter was not the first to have championed them, but Miss Munro did not say he was the first. It must be remembered, also, that in the 1940s there were few opportunities to see their work. I myself was writing for *Art News* beginning in December 1949. By then the gallery scene was beginning to change, and the work of the Abstract Expressionists—a term not then in use—was finding its way into galleries. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, as Miss Munro says, that under Frankfurter's direction *Art News* "became a catapult lifting the Abstract Expressionists to fame." Milton Brown said as much to me in the mid-1950s. Specifically, what he said was that *Art News* by then had become the *Wall Street Journal* of the New York avant-garde. And we should not overlook the attention the magazine paid to other phases of art history. Frankfurter had contacts with collectors, scholars, and museum directors throughout the world. He was an imaginative editor. Also, the magazine did not neglect the best of American artists who had themselves been the avant-garde of the 1930s. A review of what were known as the "techniques pieces" will turn up many names thought to have been placed permanently on the shelf. I am not saying that *Art News* was alone. I remember Belle Krasne, the editor of *Arts*—earlier *The Art Digest*—who, like *Art News*, was employing artists to write reviews. *Art News* was already doing this by the mid-1940s. Dore Ashton was doing a lot of work for *Arts* also. Indeed, *Arts* made an important contribution. Am I being prejudiced when I say that in the same period *Art News* had a certain panache? Painters, sculptors, and poets were writing feature articles for it. Bradbury Thompson was responsible for the layout, and had been doing it since the mid-1940s. It was really a new kind of art magazine. For this we must thank Alfred Frankfurter.

Lawrence Campbell
New York, NY

Deborah Solomon replies:

Mr. Campbell obviously harbors great affection for *Art News* magazine. He remains impressed by its one-time editor Alfred Frankfurter who, he tells us, knew everyone in the art world, valiantly promoted Thirties abstraction long after it went out of vogue, and invested the magazine with "a certain panache" by hiring poets and artists to write for it. All of this is very nice, but none of it bears the slightest relevance to the issue at hand—the issue, that is, of whether *Art News* deserves credit for lifting the Abstract Expressionists into fame. In my review of Eleanor Munro's book, I challenged her assertion that Frankfurter was "critical to the movement's success." As I pointed out, Frankfurter was in fact

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hostile to Abstract Expressionism until the late 1940s, when Thomas Hess joined his staff and convinced him to change his tune. Now along comes Mr. Campbell, who claims that Frankfurter failed to support the Abstract Expressionists in the Forties only because there were so few chances to see their work. That may have been the case if one were living in Timbuctoo, but not in Manhattan, where one could regularly see the latest work of Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, et al. at Peggy Guggenheim's celebrated gallery, Art of This Century, and at other places too. How did *Art News* review these shows? In 1948, when Pollock exhibited his first "drip" paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery, the magazine's reviewer concluded: "Despite Pollock's crashing energy, the work is lightweight . . . monotonous." Abstract Expressionism, like most major art movements of this century, did not succeed because of *Art News* but despite it.

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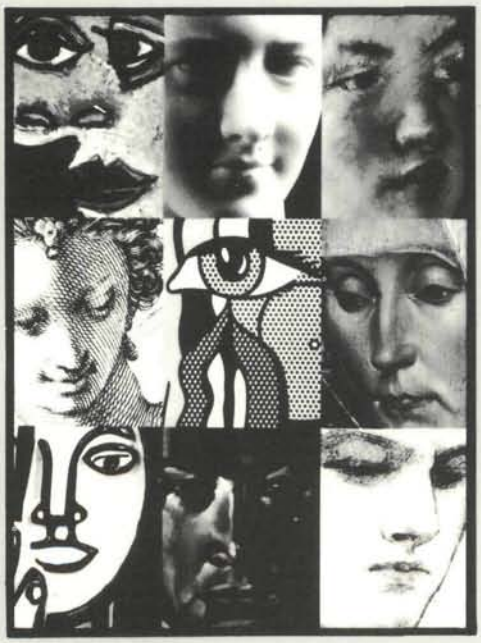

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